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TINHORNS DRAW A .45 TORNADO

by J. Edward Leithead

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WESTERN ACES

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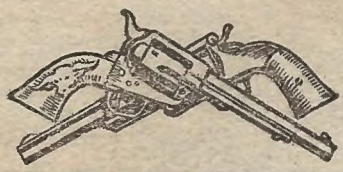

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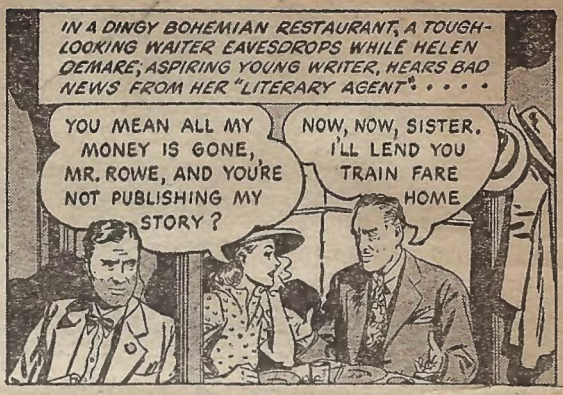

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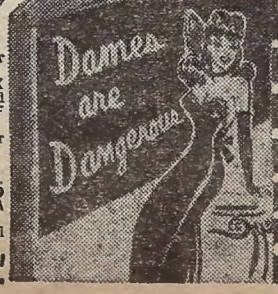

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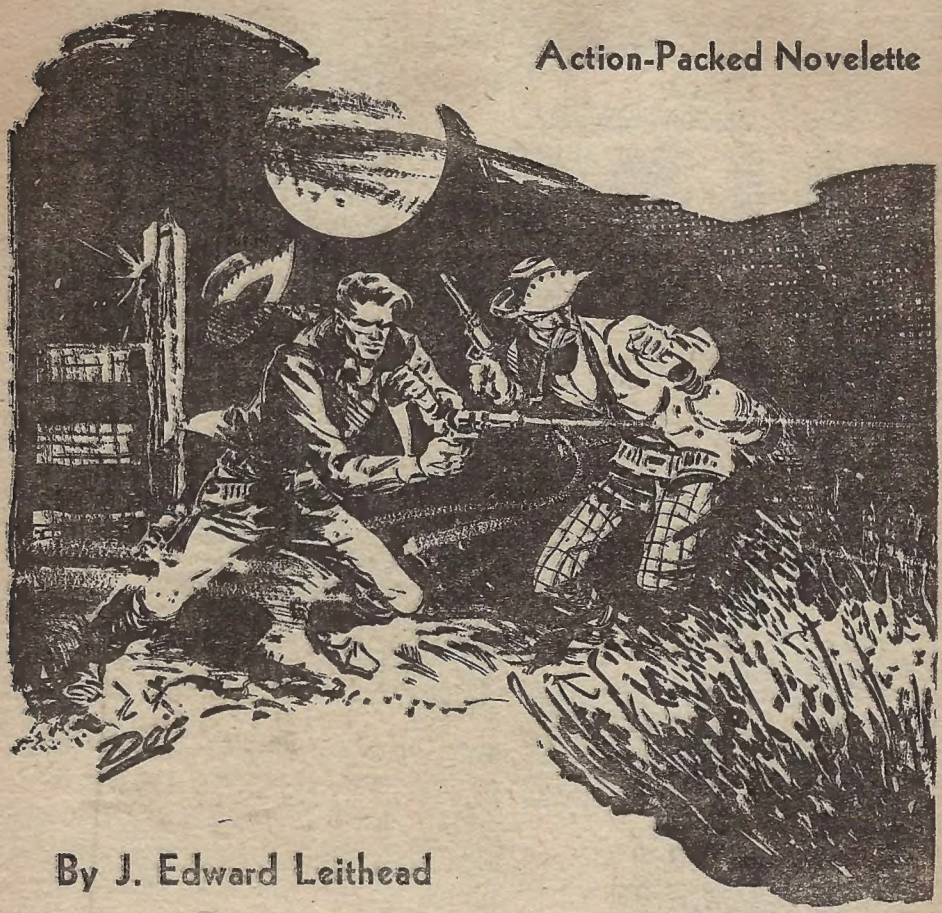


By J. Edward Leithead

CHAPTER I

THE blazing front of "Diamond" Dacer's gambling hall made the biggest pool of light along Sacaton's main street. Its effulgence, thought Ken Larison, strolling down the plank walk, was very like its diamond-adorned owner, bright but sinister. They didn't come any smarter than Dacer, who was plundering the townsfolk and dwellers of the outlying range with his crooked games, and making them like it. At least, that was young Larison's fixed belief after trying his luck there a few times.

Ornate inside and out, the place had cost Dacer many thousands of dollars, but he had got that back, and more, too. He called it "Fortune's Wheel," and was amassing a fortune from the gullible and gamblesome who nightly paid tribute to Lady Luck. The rangy Larison's long strides were carrying him past the swing doors, his ears deaf to the seductive strains of an orchestra, when he observed a girl peering in at one of the half-curtained windows. She hadn't heard the scuff of boot leather because of the music. Ken stepped closer and said:

"What's the attraction, Sue?"

He was grinning as Sue Higgins turned, but the sight of her forlorn face quickly sobered him. Her eyes, under long lashes, looked as if she had been crying,

.45 Tornado

With his gambling hell, Diamond Dacer had been long fleecing the folks of Sacaton. And when trigger-lucky Ken Larison charged the tinhorn with running brace games, Ken took a gun gamble—with his life the ace in the hole.

and Sue was not the weepy kind.

"It's Neil, Ken. He's in there, drunk as a fool, throwing his money away on roulette or faro bank. I can't see him from here, there's such a crowd." Sue's gaze was intent on Ken's rugged features, the wide-spaced gray eyes, aquiline nose, the large but firm-lipped mouth, all denoting a forceful character. "You never get drunk and squander your hard-earned

dollars gambling like that."

His lips twitched. "I'm not exactly an angel, Sue, but I don't believe in lettin' sharpers take me over the hurdles. Besides, I haven't the money to lose like your boy friend, Neil Carew."

Larison had spoken without bitterness, though it had set him back on his heels the day he discovered Carew's engagement ring on Sue's finger. He had counted on putting a ring on her finger himself, but Carew had got ahead of him. After all, Neil had more to offer her in worldly goods. Larison had only a small outfit, down in the southwest corner of the range, but Neil's old man, passing on, had left him a large, well-stocked ranch, the Open Lazy A.

It would be a long step upward for Sue Higgins, who clerked in Jowett's general store, to become mistress of the big ranch, if Neil treated her right. Ken knew that his chief occupations in the past had been drinking and gambling. Sue seized the cowman's spotted calfhide vest with tense fingers. "You think he has money to lose? You're wrong, Ken. The Open Lazy A will go to pot if he keeps it up. We had an argument just before he went in on that very subject. It's not that I care whether he has one dollar or ten thousand, understand, but I won't marry a man who's going to make me miserable by spending half his time in a gambling den. I told him I'd break our engagement if he didn't quit. He said he just had to have one more whirl at the games and staggered through the door."

Looking at her upturned face, partly shadowed as she stood with her back to the window, Ken thought what a fool Neil was to run the chance of losing such a girl as Sue Higgins. Ken's soft spot for her hadn't hardened. It never would.

"You're right fond of Neil, ain't you?" he murmured.

"Would I be wearing his ring if I wasn't?" she replied.

He put her gently aside, jerked at his hatbrim and said, "Hold everything!" Sue had a queer look on her face as he strode through the door. Ken was so different from Neil, steady, dependable.

STEERING past groups of cattlemen and townsfolk, Ken threw glances left and right, spotting Neil Carew in the crowd at the roulette wheel. Carew, leaning on one hand, was mopping his sweat-beaded face with his neckcloth. The collar of his shirt was open, his mouth was slack as he watched the ivory ball skip on the whirling wheel. When it came to rest in a pocket, Neil Carew cursed his luck. Behind the croupier, as he raked in Carew's chips, Larison saw the thinly smiling, sharp-faced Dacer, diamonds glittering on shirt front and well-kept hands.

Ken gripped Neil's shoulder firmly. "You've lost enough, I reckon. Let's go home."

Carew turned bleary eyes upward. "Larison," he said, then, half angrily, tried to jerk loose. "What I want to go home for?"

Dacer and the croupier had stiffened to attention. The big gambler broke the silence. "Since when are you riding herd on Carew, Larison? Let him be, give him a chance to win back what he's lost. His luck is liable to change."

"Not here, it ain't!" flashed Larison. "That wheel's wired for the house to win whenever your man feels like it, Dacer! I've dropped some money on this game myself."

The croupier's hand moved, flipping derringer from vest pocket, while his diamond-studded boss stepped back to give him elbow space. Blued steel had sprouted in Larison's fist, too. He fired before the refractory Neil could derange his aim. The derringer's vicious bark was engulfed in the roar of the .45. His hand bathed in blood, the croupier let go of his pocket .41, his face going ashen pale. Over his sagging shoulder, Larison was watching for Dacer to palm a gun. Carew began to struggle anew.

"Leggo, Ken!" he snarled. "Quit shootin' at my friends, or I'll—"

"Your friends!" sneered Larison. "They're fleecin' you and every man that's fool enough to buck their crooked layouts!"

Three or four gun-hung hardcases had moved briskly to Dacer's side. One strapping, whiskered fellow, Bull Yeager, mouthed, "Do we get him, boss? Say the word!"

Larison wrenched Carew's arm till he cried out and steadied .45 on the big gunslinger. "You're a swell target, Bull, if you wiggle an ear! Folks hereabouts must like to be skinned or they'd ride Dacer out of town on a rail and close the joint!"

A cattleman in the tense crowd spoke,

"No, we don't admire to be skinned, Larison. We'd make short work of this gamblin' crowd if we were sure of what you say."

An ominous muttering flowed round the room. Feet shuffled, games were suspended as the patrons massed about the central figures in the altercation. Nobody had ever charged Dacer with running brace games before. Other gunmen in Dacer's employ were taking their stand to back up his play. He must answer the accusation with convincing argument or pistol-fire. Dacer suddenly thrust Yeager and his mates aside, shunted the wounded croupier to the rear, and stood boldly beneath the lamp suspended over the roulette wheel. He was smiling, but sweat glistened on his pointed face. He knew his danger.

"Gents," said Dacer, "you can take my word for it that every game here is operated on the level. I look upon you as my friends, and no man worth his salt would stoop to cheat his friends. I've gone to great expense fitting up this place for your recreation. And mind you, we work no holdouts of any kind. You win or you lose, according to the dictates of chance." His glittering eyes fastened on Larison. "Ken, here, happens to be a loser. A poor one, obviously. But I'll overlook his gunplay and brash talk, just to prove where I stand."

"Kind of you," said Ken grimly, "but your man pulled first."

"Naturally," rejoined Dacer. "To accuse a gambler of cheating is fighting talk."

"How would we know whether you're trimmin' us or not?" a hard-faced stockman asked. "We ain't onto gamblers' tricks."

"I'll allow there are some in my profession who run their business on a sure-thing basis," answered the gambler. "But a fair percentage for the house is all I want. Like the rest of you, I'm a taxpayer, a heavy one. I have a good investment here. Do you think I'd run the risk of losing it by ringing in a cold deck on you, now and then? Let's forget it, gents, and all have a drink. In fact, the drinks will be on the house for the balance of the night."

DACER waved a hand toward the mahogany bar, but for once deserted. Cowmen and punchers responded to the invitation uncertainly. Smooth words had saved the gambler for the moment. But Larison knew he had implanted seeds of suspicion in their minds. He hated a crooked gambler as he hated a rustler. He did not follow the crowd to the bar, but, shoving gun in holster, employed both sinewy arms to drag the cursing Carew doorward.

Sue was awaiting them on the sidewalk, and as he recognized her, Neil bridled his tongue. "I lost again, Sue," he said in a thick voice. "If Ken had let me alone—"

"You hadn't a chance, like Ken said," Sue interrupted. "Oh, Neil, why can't you be a man and cut it out? You can't think anything of me, and if you keep it up, we're through!"

Her sobbing roused Neil, leaning heavily on the grim-lipped Ken. "Don't say that, Sue! I'll quit—I promise."

Larison said, "Know where his horse is? I'll take him home."

"It's tied up by the store." Sue started away, turned back abruptly. "You're such a help, Ken. I can't thank you enough."

Ken answered, "That's all right, Sue."

An hour after leaving the bright lights of Sacaton, he halted the horses at the Open Lazy A ranch house, plucked the groggy Carew from the saddle. Horner, the foreman, came in while he was putting Neil to bed. The ramrod hadn't much to say about his boss's condition, for he and the hands were accustomed to carousing with Neil. Young Carew, sprawled on the bed, looked owlishly at Larison.

"I reckon you did me a good turn tonight, Ken. Sorry I kicked up a fuss. I want to talk to you, but I'm too drunk now. Hang around till I sober up, will you?"

"Sure," said Larison.

The foreman went out, and Ken, turning out the lamp, settled in an easy chair near the bed. The next he knew, daylight was stealing through the window. He stretched cramped muscles and yawned. While waiting for the heavy sleeper to waken, he rolled a quirly, picked up a newspaper lying on the floor. It was a recent copy of the Sacaton weekly paper.

Ken became absorbed in a graphic account of the blizzards sweeping the northern ranges, killing off cattle by the hundreds. He was glad they never had that kind of weather here in the southwest, didn't see how anyone in his right mind would try to raise cattle in a land where the winter season was so long

and rigorous. Not for him [illegible] of rain sometimes bothered the [illegible] cattle raisers, especially Ken, but he'd never known a drought to cause such a big dieup of stock as was occurring on the Montana and Wyoming ranges. The view from the window was summery, yet it was midwinter.

Neil Carew stirred, making dry, smacking sounds with his lips. He rolled over and up on an elbow, his eyes meeting the steady gaze of the man in the chair.

"Boy, have I got a head on me!" said Neil. He slid from the bed, went to the washstand and drank greedily from the pitcher. Then he poured water into the basin, doused his head. He turned, dripping, to Larison.

"Sue was real mad at me, wasn't she? Guess she had reason. I'm surprised you gave me a hand, Ken, knowin' how you must feel since I—since she became engaged to me."

Ken's mouth tightened. "She ought to know her own mind. But she wasn't foolin' about breakin' it off if you go back on the promise you made last night."

"Don't I know it, Ken? I want to straighten up, and I need a good steady man like yourself around to keep this ranch from goin' on the rocks. Now, you've got a poor piece of range, account of your waterhole dryin' up every time there's a big drought. I'm on the river. What say to throwin' your herd in with mine, as partners?"

CHAPTER II

ASTONISHED by the offer, Ken Larison saw that it would be to his advantage to accept. He and his father, before the old man had gone to his final rest, had had a struggle to keep going when brassy skies turned their waterhole to mud, then baked it hard, with the result that famished Larison stock became buzzard bait. Ken knew, also, that the Open Lazy A, properly managed, would be one of the best outfits on the Sacaton.

Ken nodded slowly. "If you lay off the likker and games, it's a deal, Neil. I won't agree to run the ranch while you're away raisin' cain and wastin' the profits."

"I promised Sue, didn't I?" retorted Carew. "As a starter, there's several quarts of whisky in that closet. Take 'em out and give 'em to Horner. Then we'll have breakfast. At least, you will. All I want is black coffee, plenty of it."

Within the week, Larison, aided by his two cowhands, moved his herd of five hundred head onto the Open Lazy A. Partnership papers were drawn up by a lawyer in Sacaton, and Sue appeared radiantly happy to know Ken was going to work shoulder to shoulder with Neil.

For a month, Carew went to and from town, visiting Sue, buying ranch supplies, but avoiding the Fortune's Wheel deadfall. Sometimes Ken accompanied him. Larison heard talk to indicate the feeling against Diamond Dacer and his gambling crowd hadn't died down. Some of the ranchmen had been heavy losers at Dacer's. If his games weren't straight, he oughtn't to be allowed to operate, was the general opinion, growing in intensity.

"When you're ready to ride him out of town on a rail," Ken said, on one occasion, "let me know. I want a hand in it."

Though he kept away from the Fortune's Wheel and didn't meet Dacer, Ken knew the gambler must hate him as the cause of his sudden unpopularity. The young cowman kept an eye on Bull Yeager and other gunmen on Dacer's payroll when he saw them stalking the street. Doubting they would openly attack him, he didn't trust them not to throw lead from an alleyway.

The Open Lazy A had a contract to deliver a hundred head of beef steers to the Indian reservation west of Sacaton. Larison, busy superintending other range work, saw no reason not to let Carew head the drive. Neil had been on his good behavior for six weeks, though at times he complained to Ken that it was hard going.

The drive should have taken a week, but eleven days passed, and Carew and the men hadn't returned. Ken saddled up and rode to Sacaton. He found the missing punchers seated on the edge of the sidewalk, finishing a quart bottle. Larison pulled up beside them and the bottle ceased its travels from hand to hand as the cowhands met his penetrating gaze.

"Where's Carew?" he asked.

"Went to sleep it off in Hanley's stable, after his girl ditched him," replied an unshaven puncher, sullenly. "She hadn't oughter—"

"Shut up!" growled Larison. "Get your broncs and dust for the ranch. I'll fetch Carew."

Grumbling, they rose and staggered

off. Larison reined his horse the other way. He saw Sue on the stoop of Jowett's general store, and in a moment more was facing her from the saddle. She looked desperately unhappy.

"You're hunting Neil, of course," said Sue. "He's been here on a four-days' gambling and drinking spree. I gave him back his ring. He struck me."

Ken's eyes narrowed. "I heard about the ring."

"You think I did right, Ken?" she asked.

He nodded. "Neil broke his promise. Struck you, eh?" His jaw tightened and he lifted the reins. "You did exactly right, Sue."

Hanley's stable was at the east side of town. Larison left his horse at the door. Old Man Hanley wasn't about, so he went back to the stalls. Horses were stamping in some of them. One was Carew's bronc. In the adjoining stall he found Neil, flat on his back, mouth open and snoring. Ken laid hold of his ankles and pulled him into the runaway. Carew, his face a mass of whiskers, half roused from his stupor, began to swear.

Getting him on his feet, Larison propelled him through the stable door toward the nearest watering trough. Seated on the edge, with a firm grip on Neil's hair, Ken plunged his head into the trough, dipping it up and down until Carew was sober enough to know who was manhandling him.

"Where's the cattle money, Neil?" clipped Ken. "Forget you had a partner?"

"I reckon you know where it is," growled Carew, "and I don't give a hang! This toein' the mark all the time—I couldn't stand it. Sue, she got on her high horse and throwed my ring back at me."

"And you hit her," said Larison. "Fine specimen of a man, ain't you?"

CAREW mingled the girl's name with his oaths, and Ken slapped him hard on the mouth. Neil fumbled for his gun, eyes blazing. Ken reached over, seized the weapon, broke it to empty it of shells and stuck it in his trousers band. Carew drew a sleeve across his wet face, asked with a scowl, "This end the partnership?"

Studying him, Ken replied, "You don't want it to, eh? Arrangement suits you fine. I do the work while you play. It's not goin' to be that way. Still, havin' just moved my cattle, I'm not anxious to move 'em again so soon, and I realize a man's liable to make one back-slip. I'll give you another trial. But if you weren't drunk I'd beat you up for hittin' Sue."

Neil looked at the ground. "I'm sorry for that, but I guess it won't do no good now."

"I'll get your horse," said Ken, starting for the stable, "then we're goin' to the barbershop. You sure need a shave."

Sue was not in sight when they passed Jowett's store. They hitched at the barbershop rack, where stood three other horses with unfamiliar brands. Three of the chairs in the shop were occupied by strangers, getting haircuts and shaves. Neil climbed into a fourth chair, and Ken, as he took a seat under the wall pegs, noted sheep-lined coats hanging there.

Sacaton range riders never had need of such heavy coats. Larison knew the strangers were from the north, possibly the storm-harassed ranges about which he'd read, weeks ago, in the Sacaton paper. Ken nodded to one of the men, a square-faced, stubby-mustached fellow, as he saw the other eyeing him.

"Just blow in from the north, friend?" said Larison.

"Blow's the word," replied the man. "We're from Montana. My name's Sibbold. Other two are Berdan and Pollock. Maybe you've heard how the blizzards are wipin' out the northern stockmen?"

"I have, Sibbold. Larison's my name. I got no love for that blizzard country."

"It'll be the finish of a lot of cowmen, Larison. We aim to escape bein' wiped out if we can. Understand there's range for lease down here. We've come to see about takin' up leases. Rounded up all our cattle that hadn't froze to death, drove 'em to the nearest shippin' point, left 'em waitin' for cars."

Sibbold described some of the hardships they had undergone and Ken nodded in ready sympathy.

"There's quite a bit of grazin' land round here that ain't in use," said Larison, "but it comes high."

"We'll make out to pay, whatever it is," stated Sibbold. "We'll be stony broke if we lose what cattle are left."

Berdan and Pollock joined in the conversation. Ken looked up as the shop door opened and a white-whiskered, long-limbed oldster, with a slight stoop to his shoulders, walked in. Caleb Sudley had mild blue eyes, a friendly smile. Just about everyone on that range respected

and looked up to old Cale, the first settler on Sacaton River. He didn't look like a fighting man, but there was no doubt of the iron in his blood.

He had had a tough time surviving in the old days, and all five of his sons had died violently during the struggle for existence. Mrs. Sudley had gone with the rest. Now old Cale, retired from the cattle business, lived alone at his ranch. He hadn't carried a gun for years, hating war and its implements because of the price he had paid for his pioneering.

"Howdy, Cale?" said Larison. "Here's some Montana men with a tale that matches some of your stories of the early days, only they've been fightin' blizzards, not drought."

"I've been readin' about conditions up north," said Sudley, quickly extending his hand to the newcomers as Larison introduced them.

WHEN he learned what had brought the Montana cattlemen to the southwest, Sudley declared, "There's grass for all of you on this range. Glad to do what we can to help brother cattlemen in a jackpot. I remember the first year I arrived on the Sacaton River," and Cale was launched on one of his reminiscences.

Neil Carew had been shaved. He drifted out of the shop without Ken observing his departure. Neil needed a drink, and while getting it he spoke of the strangers and their mission. The result rather surprised him in his befuddled state. His auditors, mostly cattlemen, stamped wrathfully out of the Fortune's Wheel. Diamond Dacer, who had been listening in the background, doing a little mental figuring, signaled his gunslingers and strolled forth to follow the crowd.

Mob sounds fell upon startled ears within the barbershop. Ken Larison shot a glance at the chair Carew had occupied, then faced the front window with the others. The menacing appearance of the brand owners and cowhands marching upstreet sent a thrill through Larison.

Cale Sudley said, "What's got the boys on the rampage? They look like they were goin' to hang someone." He went out with Ken at his heels.

The leaders of the mob had reached the barbershop, yelling, "Where's them Montana cowmen? Trot 'em out!"

"Who told you about them?" hollered Larison.

"Carew," a stockman bellowed answer. "If they think they're goin' to overrun this range with northern cattle, we'll give 'em what-for and send 'em home with their tails draggin'!"

Sudley pitched up his voice. "That ain't no way to talk! Their herds are starvin' and freezin' to death on the upper ranges. If we call ourselves human, we'll give them a hand. What harm will they do? You know there's plenty of land for lease."

"What harm?" another belligerent cowman made himself heard. "Plenty of harm! A glut of cattle will force prices 'way down. And I wouldn't trust strangers to stay inside the boundaries of them leased lands. We'd be fightin' to keep 'em off our ranges in no time. You're against gunplay, Cale, and if you don't want to see blood spilled, you tell them fellers to hightail it and keep their dang cows where they belong."

"Boys, you're jumpin' spooky-wise at shadders!" cried Sudley. "Them things you're afraid of won't happen. Get hold of yourselves and act reasonable."

But all power to reason had deserted the angry stockmen. They pressed forward, utterly ignoring Sudley's attempt at peacemaking. At almost any other time, thought Larison, they would have listened to old Cale. Ken knew the Montana visitors were in danger of being roughly handled, perhaps shot. He suddenly grabbed Sudley's arm, pulled him back through the door and locked it.

The mob crowded up to pound on the door, threatening to break it down or smash the window. The owner of the place, far from fainthearted, dived into the rear room for a shotgun. Ken halted him with a sharp command, said to the Montana men, who were checking the loads in their shooting-irons:

"We'll try to get you out the back way. If a shot's fired there'll be a slaughter."

"No doubt of that," added Cale Sudley gravely. "I've seen it happen too often. That's a good bunch of men out yonder, none better, but they've got their necks bowed just now. Your best play is to hit the road, like Larison says, and when they cool off, I'll talk to 'em."

"We're ready to fight, if need be," Sibbold asserted. "But we don't want to cause you fellows any trouble. How'll we get our horses?"

"I'll get 'em," said Larison, heading for the back room. "Cale, talk to that mob, but don't unlock the door."

CHAPTER III

LEAVING the barbershop by the rear door, Larison cut through an alley lower down and came out on the main street. The mob, closely packed around the shop front, wasn't watching the hitchrack. Swiftly Ken untied the horses of the Montana men, stepped into the saddle of a rough-coated bay. Then someone in the crowd caught sight of him and shouted:

"There's Larison sneakin' off with their broncs!"

A cowpuncher carrying a coiled lariat, built a hasty loop and spun it as Ken kicked the bay toward the nearest alleyway, towing the other horses. He tried to dodge the swishing rope, but was noosed about the shoulders, yanked clear of the saddle as the puncher braced the whole line across his hip. Ken struck the ground hard, but was up in a minute, tugging to loosen the rope. Through slitted, angry eyes he saw Bull Yeager and his gunmen hurrying toward him. Thinking they were going to jump him, Ken stopped wrenching at the noose to work his gun loose. Because of the binding rope, he was a little slow. Then he saw his mistake.

Two of Yeager's mates plunged past him to stop the horses, which had wheeled to flee down the street. Bull and three others faced about on the sidewalk with drawn guns, the big Coltman barking:

"You fellers freeze or you'll walk into some hot lead! And Sheriff Callum will say we done right. You ain't got no call to gang up on visitors thisaway!"

The Sacaton cattlemen fell back in surprise. Larison shared that feeling. As he pulled the noose over his head he observed Diamond Dacer standing alone by the hitchrack, a half-smile on his sharp face. The two gunmen had caught the horses. Ken mounted the bay, and the reins of the other animals were pressed into his hand.

Riding for the rear of the barbershop, he riddled out the reason for the Coltmen's unexpected assistance. Dacer was interested in having the northern cattlemen return with their herds. The talk of running Dacer out of Sacaton hadn't subsided, and it would divert the local cowmen's attention from him if they had something else to worry about.

Old Cale was waiting at the back door with Sibbold and his friends when Ken arrived with the mounts. The Montana men scrambled into leather, thanking Larison for his aid. Sudley called after them:

"I'll have the boys quieted down by the time you fellows return with your cattle. They'll regret actin' up so cussed mean."

Watching Sibbold, Berdan, and Pollock spur away across the back lots, Larison said to Sudley:

"Notice who lent me a hand after I was roped out of the saddle?"

"Yes," said Cale, "and they didn't act without Dacer's orders. I can't understand him makin' a stand for law and order."

Ken told the oldster how he viewed it. "And if there's war when the northern stockmen come back, it won't hurt Dacer's feelin's if a few of those urgin' action against him are killed off. He can do business with whoever's left after the smoke clears."

Sudley's face clouded. "Dacer's a slick one. A bad one, too. But I feel fairly certain there'll be no fightin'. I'll do my best. Glad you see eye to eye with me, Ken."

They walked through the building to the front. The crowd was dispersing, knowing the Montana men had got away. Dacer and his gunslingers had withdrawn. Sudley sat down in a barber's chair to have his beard trimmed. He would talk to his neighbors when they were in better humor.

Ken went out, untied his horse and Carew's, paying no heed to caustic remarks passed by the few men still on the sidewalk. He spied Neil farther down the street, called to him, and they hit the road for the Open Lazy A.

Carew, taken to task by Larison, said he hadn't intended to start any trouble by spreading word about the Montana stockmen. He seemed badly broken up over losing Sue, but believed that Ken hadn't severed partnership. Neil failed to tell Ken, however, that besides squandering the cattle money he was several thousand dollars in debt to Diamond Dacer. Between the roulette wheel and faro bank he had been properly trimmed, didn't know how he was going to pay up without Larison finding it out. Neil refused to believe that Dacer was crooked.

OLD CALE SUDLEY'S efforts for peace bore fruit. He won a half promise from his neighbors that the northern ranchers would be allowed to settle on

leased land without opposition. As far as Larison could tell, Carew wasn't particularly interested in the coming of the Montana outfits. But he seemed worried about something, wouldn't say what it was.

One day Neil was missing from the ranch. Having no doubt that he had headed for town for another spree, Ken hit the trail in grim mood. If he couldn't get Neil straightened out soon, there was little use in sticking to him. Expecting to find Carew's bronc at the Fortune's Wheel's tie-rack, Larison stopped there first. Although the rack was empty, midday being a slack time for Dacer's business, Ken dropped from the saddle and hit the batwings. Dacer was leaning against the bar, paring his fingernails with a pocketknife. He raised his eyes lazily.

"Not here," said Dacer, before Ken could speak. "He had a couple of drinks and rode out of town again."

Larison, starting back to the door, paused. "By the way, Dacer, when are you leavin' town, for the town's good?"

Dacer smiled creepily. "Maybe never, Ken. Sorry to disappoint you."

But the gambler's nonchalance forsook him as the young cowman passed out of the door. He snapped at Bull Yeager:

"We'll have to put that hombre away one of these days. He lit the fire under us. That peace-loving old fool Sudley is another thorn in our sides. Soon as he persuaded the Sacaton men to let the Montana outfits come in peacefully, right away the local boys got back to the old subject. They're about ready to give me notice to leave. Good thing I heard of it, and that Carew was willing to make war talk to 'em, in return for canceling his gambling debt. While there's a fight on they'll forget about me."

"Carew ought to swing it," said Bull, showing yellow fangs in a grin. "As for givin' Larison his come-uppance, just say when, Diamond, and it'll be done. Seems to me we ought to be within call durin' that meetin' at the Open Lazy A. Larison, like Sudley, is against mixin' smoke with the Montana bunch."

After leaving the Fortune's Wheel, Ken had ridden to Jowett's store. Sue said she hadn't seen Neil. From the way she spoke, Ken knew that her love for Neil was dead, never to be rekindled. She loked at Ken with new eyes. He sensed that his fondness for Sue, which he had been at no pains to conceal, was reciprocated. It gave him such a heady feeling that he was rather inattentive to her report that the cattlemen at last were preparing to take action against Diamond Dacer. Later he remembered it with a jolt.

Carew wasn't at the Open Lazy A when Larison returned. In fact, Neil didn't arrive until after sundown, dusty but fairly sober, his horse lathered. Ken, asking where he'd been, got no satisfactory answer. But around eight o'clock, cattlemen from the surrounding range began drifting in. One look at their grim faces, as he and Neil met them in the living room, and Ken suspected what was up.

The absence of Cale Sudley convinced him, even before Carew, fortified with whisky, opened up in a tirade against the Montana cattlemen. The price of beef was sure to take a dive, he said, if they let the outsiders bring in all those cattle. And range rights would be ignored. There would be stampedes and sudden death, a general conflict. The Montana bunch were interlopers and should be treated as such. Hoarse cries of approval came from every corner of the room.

Ken sat drumming with his fingers on the table, a gleam in his eyes. All the good that Cale Sudley had accomplished, to settle the range problem peacefully, was being undone by his half-drunk partner. Carew, who hadn't seemed to care about the interlopers, was now savagely urging war. Ken thought he saw an explanation for it when he recalled the gambler's cool indifference and what Sue had told him about matters coming to a head. Larison got to his feet, interrupting Carew.

"You men promised Sudley you wouldn't fight the Montana outfits. They've got a right to lease here and won't pother us. Don't pay any mind to Carew. He's only the mouthpiece, I suspect, for a fellow who dassn't show his face here—Diamond Dacer. You didn't let me know you were goin' to uproot Dacer, but I heard about it. Anyway, he's behind this war talk, knowin' you'll overlook him in the clash with the newcomers."

CAREW lurched toward his partner, drawing back a fist. "You lie, Ken! Dacer's got nothin'—" Ducking as Neil swung, Ken hurled him back in his chair.

"Let Carew alone!" shouted a grizzled cowman. "We'll attend to Dacer in due

time. Right now we're more interested in keepin' our range free of invaders. We only half promised Sudley to let 'em come, Larison, and we've changed our minds. Cale's all right, but I reckon he wouldn't mind leasin' the range he has no use for, and you have some you don't need since throwin' in with Carew. Easy to see why you're so keen for a peaceful invasion."

Ken stood with fists clenched, eyes blazing. There was but one way, he thought, to keep the cattlemen from going on the warpath. Get old Cale Sudley, whom Carew had been careful not to invite to the meeting, and have him exert his influence for peace. It might not succeed, but it was worth trying. Turning on his heel, Larison left the living room. He strapped on his spurs, quit the house on the run, heading for the corral.

Larison didn't know that hostile eyes and ears at the front windows had taken in everything that occurred in the ranch house. On advice of his chief pistoleer, Dacer had sent Yeager and a half-dozen others secretly to cover the meeting. Ken hadn't said where he was going, but Bull, when he saw the mounted figure flying down the road toward Sudley's, gave his mates the nod and swung into saddle. Sudley was too potent a power for peace to be allowed to reach the Open Lazy A. It was time that both Cale and young Larison were given a dose of lead medicine.

Two hundred yards from the home corral, going at a gallop, Ken made an involuntary ducking motion as guns roared behind him. He heard the whine of passing lead. His Colt rasped from the scabbard and he slued round as gunflame tore holes in the starlit night. For an instant, he believed some of the cattlemen were following to smoke him down. But Bull Yeager's voice rumbled above the hoof hammering, betrayed who they were.

Ken slashed fire where the voice had sounded, and Bull emitted a deeper rumble, tinged with pain, "That feller's got cat-eyes or he's trigger-lucky!" Larison threw a second shot, but an outcry in a different voice proclaimed that some other rider had got between Yeager and the cowman's spurting gun.

Leaning low and spurring hard, Larison and his ground-grabbing bronc shaved disaster a dozen times in the next half mile. The saddle lobos still hung to his trail, their sixes blasting while his remained quiet. Past clusters of trees bordering both sides of the road, where it was impossible to see men or mounts, Larison led the race at a pounding run. Beyond, the road wound through a treeless stretch. As he flashed down the stretch and his strung-out pursuers trickled into the starlight, Ken, reserving his fire for this moment, cut loose again. A dark figure shot sideways from a horse's back, the animal swerving into a field.

Ken's rattling gunfire emptied another saddle. Three pencils of fire unraveled in answer, then the gang was pulling up. He knew from the feeble reply that they'd used up all the loads in their guns, desperately eager to riddle him before he'd got this far. Sudley's was now only a mile or so southward. Larison made good time while they stopped to reload.

It looked as if he had shaken his pursuers as he neared the Sudley ranch, although a bend in the road kept him from observing more than a quarter mile of the backtrack. He slowed his horse to a trot, passing beneath the rustling alamos in Sudley's front yard. The bronc spread its forelegs as Ken stepped from the saddle to the porch of the dark house. Old Cale always went early to bed unless there was some special reason for staying up. But Ken didn't have to knock. A light sleeper, the old man had heard the trotting horse. He opened the door, clad in shirt and trousers, but unarmed as usual.

"That's risky," said Larison.

"What is, Ken?" Sudley asked.

"Comin' to the door without a gun," replied Larison. "I might've been one of Dacer's Coltmen."

CHAPTER IV

SUDLEY didn't understand. "What in the world would they be comin' after me for? You know I never pack a gun," he said to Ken.

He listened in growing excitement as Ken told the reason for his desperate night ride. The old man was not only willing but eager to return with him to the Open Lazy A. While Sudley hastened to his bedroom to finish dressing, Larison stood a moment on the porch. Hearing no hoofbeats, he concluded that the gunmen had given up the chase, and led his bronc around the side of the house. Old Cale came out with his saddle and a stable

lantern, and made tracks for the round pen. He was wearing a six-shooter, and Ken voiced approval.

"We may run into those fellows on the return trip," said the young cowman, "though I didn't hear nothin' of 'em out front."

"I was thinkin of that," returned Sudley, slipping the lantern's bail over the gatepost of the corral. "Guess I ain't forgot how to shoot, and it's mighty important that we reach Open Lazy A before the meetin' breaks up. But I don't feel natural totin' iron any more."

He went into the enclosure to rope his horse. Without warning, two guns blazed from a weed patch on the east side of the yard. Larison felt one bullet fan his cheek. The other must have nicked his horse, which snorted and reared. He dropped the reins, swept out his Colt. A third enemy gun thundered. Then two more. Bull Yeager and his men, instead of turning back, had steathily descended on the ranch to finish the peacemakers.

Larison, hugging the heavy gatepost, let drive at the powder-blazing weeds. There were sharp oaths and thrashing sounds as the Coltmen shifted ground under the rain of bullets. Ken reached up and shattered the lantern with his pistol barrel, shouting to Sudley, "Run for the house!"

The gate stood ajar and old Cale charged through, Ken running at his side, rocking hammer spur as Yeager and his mates resumed their trigger-twitching. The pair made it to the back door through a blizzard of fire. Once inside, Sudley bolted the door. The murderous assault had roused a long dormant side of his nature. His voice was that of the fighting men who had conquered the wild Sacaton range.

"Peaceful methods won't work with that scum. But we'll be too late if they keep us cooped up here long!"

They sprang away from the door as slugs smashed through the planks. Larison, sinking to his knees, crawled to the single window, broke out the pane. He was emptying his Colt at flashes in the yard when Sudley crept to his side. The oldster's six-shooter took up the tune as the younger man sat back on his heels to reload. Ken didn't believe they had done the besiegers much damage so far. Two of the gang were still in the weed patch, the others had posted themselves behind the corral poles.

"They're hard to bead," grunted Sudley. He retired in favor of Larison, spilled shells making a tinkling sound on the floor as the oldster worked feverishly to reload his .45. "It's gettin' later all the time!"

All was quiet in the weed patch and the corral as Larison peeped over the window sill. Then suddenly his gun exploded, he rose and leaned from the window, his Colt going like a trip hammer. Shots boomed in reply, the bullets battering wall and window frame.

Old Cale grasped Ken's belt and pulled him down, exclaiming, "Tryin' to get yourself killed?"

"Two of 'em were sneakin' for the front of the house," said Larison, gingerly feeling the top of his head, where a bullet had left its bloody track. "I hit one, but he kept goin'. Cale, you watch the back while I take the front."

As Ken groped into the front room, he detected stealthy footsteps on the porch. He hunkered down in the dark, slipping the last cartridge of six into his death-spreader. A hand fumbled at the latch, the door, creaking a little, swung inward. A gaunt, bent figure was framed in the opening, the bell-crowned hat of a second killer showing just behind it.

"Easy now," the second man warned. "Ain't sure we got Larison."

"Want to try again?" Ken snarled, and the blackness of the room was split by his muzzle fire.

THE first gunman, with one foot across the doorsill, gave a convulsive leap and crashed to the floor. His companion, thumbing a shot, ducked back around the door. But he uttered a yelp of pain as he vanished, for Ken had triggered fast. He heard the man's feet dragging across the porch, straightened out of his crouch and darted to the door. The gunman wheeled, shooting, as Ken ordered him to throw down his smoker. Ken hadn't expected the fellow to yield. Stooping, he fired as the other's slug missed him. The killer reeled to the edge of the porch and fell off.

There was no sound from the gunman after he hit the ground. But for several minutes guns had been booming at the rear of the ranch house. Larison rushed back to give Sudley a hand. The oldster

jerked away from the window as Ken entered the room. The thud of his toppling body filled Larison with an insensate fury. He thought old Cale was done for, and, kneeling by the window, lashed lead at the flame points in the corral until his hammer struck a dead shell. Sudley groaned and Larison scrambled to his side.

"How many left?" gasped Cale. "That meetin' must be nearly over. Maybe I can ride—"

"We ain't goin' nowhere yet," Larison interrupted grimly. "There's still Bull Yeager and two others."

Gently he pulled the old man out of range of the window, scratched a match and opened his bloodstained shirt. The wound was ugly-looking, but not necessarily fatal. Ken rudely bandaged it, went back to the window.

From then until dawn he fought alone, failing in several attempts to dislodge Yeager and his men from the corral. He felt low in his mind as dawnlight revealed the corral empty except for Sudley's dead horse. The gunmen apparently had gone, not caring to risk a daylight siege. Ken and old Cale were still alive, but Diamond Dacer's pistoleers had kept them from attending the cattlemen's meeting.

Sudley was in even lower spirits than Larison, and suffering intensely from his wound. Ken went out in search of his horse, keeping his eyes peeled for the gunman. He found his bronc half a mile down the trail, rode back to the house.

"Cale," he said, "I don't like to leave you alone, but I reckon you'll be safe while I get one of my wagons from Open Lazy A. Have to take you to the doc at Sacaton. I'm breakin' with Neil Carew."

Sudley nodded slowly. "He ain't much good, that boy. We're marked men, you and me, because we want peace. But I don't guess anybody will bother me till you get back. Just load my gun, will you?"

Larison did so, left the house and mounted. He gave a last look around before hitting the trail. Carew was saddling a horse as Larison rode up to the corral at Open Lazy A.

"Your friend, Diamond Dacer, ought to feel pretty good this mornin'," Ken said bleakly, "though he'd be better pleased if his gunhawks had bumped off Sudley and me last night. Is Dacer tradin' you some IOU's you can't pay, for puttin' over that war talk?"

"No," said Carew, and went on saddling.

Ken hit the dirt. "Well, we're through. You can tear up those pardnership papers. I'm tellin' my men to cut out my herd and drift it back to the old range."

"Won't be able to lease it to the Montana cattlemen, then, will you?" sneered Neil. "But don't worry. They won't set foot in this territory."

"You'll do all you can to prevent it, eh?" Ken's jaw was rigid. "I've been itchin' to give you this for some time!"

Neil flung hand to six-shooter, but before he could draw, Ken's fist smashed him on the chin. Carew flopped on his back, lay twitching as Ken picked up his horse's reins and went down the yard. Fifteen minutes later his two cowhands were raising dust toward the cattle-dotted range, and Ken, seated in one of his ranch wagons, his saddler hitched to the tailgate, was driving along the road to Sudley's.

AS HE NEARED Cale's house, Larison saw two horses standing by the porch. Halting the wagon, he made sure his gun rode loose in the holster before climbing down. Two men with drawn Colts stepped through the doorway as he reached the porch steps. Both were star-badgers.

"I'm surprised you came back, Larison," said Sheriff Callum. "But maybe you're goin' to throw some kind of a bluff."

"I don't know what you're talkin' about," replied Ken.

"Come in here," ordered the sheriff. He added to his deputy, "Take his gun."

Bewildered, Ken offered no resistance. He walked between the two lawmen to the bedroom where he had left Cale Sudley. The oldster was in a coma apparently dying.

"He's been shot twice," said Sheriff Callum, "and I reckon you can tell us who did it."

"Twice!" exclaimed Ken. He bent closer, saw that all the blood staining Sudley's shirt hadn't come from a single wound. The bandage Ken had fashioned was missing. He turned to the grim peace officers. "Sudley had one wound when I left to get a wagon to take him to Sacaton. I was sure the men who tried to kill

us last night—Bull Yeager's gang—had gone. All but a couple that I sieved. Say," he recollected suddenly, "I didn't notice 'em when I came in. One was layin' in the front room, the other by the porch."

"Not here when we came, Larison."

"Yeager was hidin' somewhere when I rode out, then. Took 'em away after shootin' this poor, helpless—"

"Don't try to work up any fake sorrow," Callum interposed harshly. "Bull Yeager was in town when we left. It was Bull, in fact, who reported the shootin'. Said he was comin' up the road at daybreak, saw you ridin' away fast. He stopped here, found Sudley as he is now, but was afraid to move him. When we arrived, I roused Cale enough to ask how it happened, and he gasped, 'Larison and me—' Then he fell unconscious. Wanted to say you and him had a fallin' out, no doubt."

Ken shook his head vigorously. "Aimed to tell you we had been jumped by Yeager's gang. Are you takin' Bull's word against mine, Callum? He saw a chance to get rid of me safely, along with Cale. Don't you know Cale and I were workin' together for the peace of the range?"

Callum's mustache twitched. "I can imagine Cale playin' peacemaker, but not you. Still Yeager's a bad actor. We'll get at the bottom of this when we reach town. I won't handcuff you if you promise not to attempt a getaway."

"You have it," said Ken. "Let's get started. Fill that wagon with hay, so Cale won't be jolted more'n necessary. Although it looks as if he won't last out the ride to Sacaton."

With the heavily breathing oldster in the wagon bed, Larison swung to the seat, shook out the reins. Sheriff and deputy rode on either side of the wagon. Out on the road, cowboys passed them at gallop, heading for town. These flying riders only waved their hands in answer to the sheriff's shouted query as to why they were in such a hurry. Callum began to look worried.

"Maybe them Montana men have showed up with their cattle," he said.

Ken Larison, believing the sheriff's guess was a bull's-eye, drove on in stony silence. He broke that silence as they turned into the main street of Sacaton, which was boiling with cattlemen and cowhands.

"The stock trains must be in sight, Callum. What're you goin' to do about it? Let 'em fight?"

"No," Callum answered stoutly. "I'll get my other deputy, see what we can do before it reaches the shootin' stage."

Larison leaned out of the wagon, drew his .45 from the lawman's waistband.

Callum snapped, "Hey, you're my prisoner!"

"We can talk about that later," Ken said, holstering the gun. "Right now, I'll be a lot more useful to you as a deputy sheriff. Soon as I get Sudley to the doc's office, I'll join you."

Callum looked at him a moment. "Go ahead, Ken. I've got my work cut out for me!" He and his deputy spurred away toward the milling stockmen, and Ken swung the wagon team in the opposite direction.

CHAPTER V

HELPING Larison carry Sudley into his office, Doctor McCann shook his head gravely. "Old Cale won't be the only casualty. The trains bringing in those northern herds are up the line, and the minute the owners start unloading the local boys will be on top of them. It's too bad."

"If Cale could talk," said Ken, "trouble might be sidestepped yet. But since he can't, I'll do what peacemakin' I can with a six-shooter." He added earnestly, as they laid Sudley on McCann's operating table, "Do all that's possible to save him, doc."

Ken hurried out, untied his saddle horse from the tailgate. The bronc was moving downstreet before his right foot found the stirrup. The Sacaton rangemen were swarming around the jail. Ken saw the sheriff and his deputies, all three disarmed, being pushed through the jail door. A guard of half a dozen citizens took their stand in front, and a cattleman yelled as Larison rode within earshot.

"Keep them lawmen in there till it's over!"

Ken's teeth clenched. Apparently he was the only man still free and footloose who was opposed to fighting the Montana stockmen. He wondered if he could bluff those guards and release Sheriff Callum and deputies. Before attempting it he must replenish the ammunition he had used up the night previous. He swung his horse toward Jowett's general store and leaped off. Jowett and Sue Higgins

were just inside the door, watching the mob. The girl didn't know Ken was in trouble with the law. He told her quickly, adding that he and Carew had split the blankets.

"Haven't much time to talk, Sue. I came after some cartridges."

"Ain't got any, Ken," Jowett spoke up. "Sold out."

"Sold 'em to those kill-crazy fellows out yonder?" Ken asked.

The storekeeper said, "No." He looked scared.

"Mr. Jowett's afraid to talk because his life was threatened," Sue broke in. "His whole stock of ammunition was bought up yesterday by Diamond Dacer. We've had to turn down all the rangemen who came to purchase rifle and pistol cartridges. They didn't like it a bit."

"Dacer, eh?" said Larison, his eyes narrowing. "Funny he'd have need of so much ammunition all of a sudden. I'll go see him."

He flung out of the store, hit leather. Cattlemen and cowboys were mounting to ride up the railroad track, extending northward from the shipping pens at the edge of town. Some of the riders carried crowbars to pry up the rails. Ken was no longer interested in freeing Sheriff Callum. It couldn't be done without battling the guards. He had a better plan.

There was but one horse at the Fortune's Wheel hitchrack—Diamond Dacer's. Larison swung down and stalked in, his right hand brushing his gun scabbard. Not a game was running, and the bartenders were leaning on the empty bar. Bull Yeager and his gunmen were conspicuous by their absence. But Dacer was present, dealing a game of solitaire at a table. He started up as Larison entered, squinting through the smoke of his cigar.

"Expected I'd be out of the way, locked up for shootin' Sudley, didn't you, Dacer?" gritted Ken. "But I'm here for a showdown. What'd you want with that stock of cartridges you bought from Jowett?"

Dacer frowned, then smiled thinly. "So he told you I got 'em. You'll find out why I wanted them, soon enough!"

"I know," said Larison, "without your tellin' me. You've sent your gunmen to meet the Montana outfits, to help them fight their way into Sacaton. And the smokeroos have taken the cartridges, leavin' no extra ammunition for the local cowmen. You want to be sure the Montana stockmen win the fight. The local fellows, with just what they've got in their belts to draw on, will be out of cartridges pretty quick in a big battle. Tinhorn, you and me are goin' to stop that fight!" He snaked out his .45 as the gambler's hand moved hipward. "Step out to your horse or I'll leave you here on the floor!"

Dacer hesitated, then came forward slowly. Falling into step with the gambler, Larison didn't frisk him, but kept his six-shooter against Dacer's ribs until the man had mounted. There was death in the cards for Dacer that day, whether Ken won or lost, but he didn't want to kill an unarmed man. Larison pushed his horse alongside the gambler's, telling him where to turn. They left Sacaton ahead of the mob, riding parallel with the rails.

ABOUT a mile above town, Larison spied the first section of the stock train at a halt. Men ahorse and afoot were grouped near the locomotive. Ken, looking behind, saw the Sacaton cowmen coming at a swinging trot. He ordered the gambler to spur up, still tilting his Colt for the throwdown if Dacer tried any tricks.

As they galloped toward the train, Ken saw that the mounted men were Bull Yeager and his gunslingers. Yeager held the hackamore of a pack horse, which carried the ammunition bought from Jowett. The other men standing about were Sibbold, Berdan, and Pollock, and some of their cowboys. Observing the riders heading up the plain, Larison and Dacer well in advance of the mob, the group at the trackside scattered, preparing for action.

As the horsemen broke their close formation, Ken spotted a familiar figure which had escaped his notice before. Neil Carew sat hunched in his saddle, ready to side Dacer's gunman against his own neighbors, the men he had harangued to go to war.

Dacer turned his head suddenly, casting a look of triumph at the cowman riding beside him. "Well, the boys have recognized me and here they come. I reckon you lose, Larison."

Yeager had turned loose the pack horse to lead his men at a fast trot toward the approaching pair. Ken eyed the gang a moment. "Holler for 'em to pull up and

drop their belts on the ground, tinhorn, or you'll get my first bullet!"

Dacer proved himself a gambler to the end. With a lightning movement he slid over to the left side of his horse, throwing his weight on the left stirrup. He flipped out his gun as he moved. A bullet smashed into him, yet he thumbed hammer. Larison ducked, wrenched his horse to a stop.

Hard hit, Dacer had fallen backward to the ground, his left foot clearing the stirrup. His horse pounded on, and he pushed up on one elbow as Ken looked at him over his gunsights. They fired together. Ken's shirt sleeve was ripped from wrist to elbow by hot lead. His bullet had struck the gambler's half-open, snarling mouth. Dacer's eyes protruded; he jerked back, flat on the ground, drew up one leg and was still.

Larison, leaping down, snatched the smoking revolver from Dacer's fingers, turned in a crouch to trigger two-handed at the nearing Coltmen. Bull Yeager was foremost, throwing down. His lead kicked up a gout of dust.

The next minute he was pitching headlong, lifted from the saddle by a slug through his chest. He flopped to earth roaring, staggered up again, a man of immense vitality, a killing machine until heart or brain ceased to function. He worked his trigger as he lunged toward Larison. Ken felt the bite of lead, but it didn't spoil his aim. His right-hand Colt banged once, twice. Both bullets tore into Yeager's left side. He raised his feet higher with each step, his gun-arm sagging. Suddenly he chinned the sod.

Two of the gang were swinging from saddles, smoke mushrooming from slanted pistols. Ken spotted lead on one, the gunman bucking as he hit the ground. His companion, impeding another slug, reeled against his horse. The bronc jumped sideways and its late rider sunned his spurs. Half blinded by smoke and dust, Larison was aware of another horseman riding him down, gun drumming unceasingly. Neil's whisky-flushed face was behind the roaring Colt.

Larison sighted on a small star on the forehead of Carew's bronc. The animal reared up as Ken fired. It went over in a back-fall, but Neil, kicking off the stirrups, jumped clear of the toppling horse. Larison was up and plunging through the dust as Carew rose. He had lost his hat, but clung to his gun. Ken cracked him on the wrist and the weapon fell. Neil clawed at his former partner's right arm, screaming curses. Ken swung with his gun-filled left, landing on Neil's bare head. A second tap of the Colt barrel laid him senseless at Larison's feet.

KEN squatted on his spurs, expecting to be the target of the other gunmen charging in. When no shots were fired, he stared in bewilderment. Yeager's pals were riding away at top speed, not back toward the train and the Montana stock raisers, but westward. Thundering hoofs close behind him made Ken realize why they were fleeing. He faced about, flinging up both hands, as the Sacaton cattlemen swept toward him.

"Hold it, neighbors!" he yelled. "You've got to listen to me!"

They began sawing on reins, though the glances of many strayed from the bloodstained, dusty figure to the men grouped by the distant stock train. The sun flashed on weapons in the hands of the Montana men, getting set to fight for their herds.

"If Cale Sudley hadn't been besieged at his ranch last night," Ken hurried on, "I reckon you fellows wouldn't be ridin' like madmen to keep Sibbold and his friends from unloadin'. Cale's now layin' at the point of death in Sacaton, struck down by killers' bullets."

Their excited faces showed concern. A rancher asked, "Who shot him and why? Cale's a peace-lovin' hombre, never goes heeled—"

"That's the reason he was drilled!" shouted Larison. "His strivin' for peace didn't suit Diamond Dacer, who knew you'd run him out of Sacaton if there wasn't a war to keep you busy. I told you that at the meeting last night, but would you listen? No, instead you listened to this traitor!" He pointed to Carew, who was trying to get up. "I broke with Neil this mornin'. Though I didn't know it at the time, he was saddlin' to ride here and help Dacer's pistoleers fight you—his old neighbors!"

A wrathful murmuring ran through the cavalcade, and Neil Carew cringed on the ground.

"Wait, you ain't heard it all," said Ken. "I want you to know how Dacer was plottin' your destruction, with Carew as his willin' tool. See that pack horse up yon-

der? Its pack contains the cartridges Dacer bought from Jowett yesterday, all that Jowett had in stock, so's you wouldn't have any reserve ammunition and were sure to be licked, with Bull Yeager's gang and the Montana stockmen fightin' you together.

"Seein' how near you played into Dacer's hands, I'm hopin' you have sense enough not to go on and mix smoke with the newcomers. They don't want to fight, but they will if pushed to it. Cale Sudley and me have bore the brunt of this, tryin' to make peace. If Cale dies—well, it'll be a vain sacrifice unless you men call off the fight and go home."

Realizing how they had been duped, the Sacaton cowmen looked at one another uncomfortably. Their anger shifted from the northern stockmen to Diamond Dacer and all who had aided him. One oldster, a long-time friend of Sudley's, said:

"I reckon you and Cale had the right idea, Ken." He glanced around at the still form of the gambler, then his gaze swung back, pinning frostily on Carew. "Dacer's been settled with, and most of his gunslingers. But there's still Carew to get his needin's."

Neil rose, yelling frenziedly, "Not the rope, boys, not the rope! I owed Dacer a big gamblin' debt! I had to—"

The riders closed in on him, Ken stepping aside. He couldn't look at the panic-stricken cowman who had insisted on herding with the wrong kind of men. The horsebackers began to move away with their prisoner. Out of the corner of his eye, Larison saw that they were riding west. There was a clump of trees about a half mile from the railroad track. A Sacaton cattleman, last to leave the spot, called to Larison:

"See you in town, Ken. Tell them Montana fellows to come on and unload. There'll be no trouble."

WALKING to his horse, Larison climbed heavily into the saddle. He trotted up the right of way, one hand raised, with the palm outward. The Montana men quickly holstered their shooting-irons. A few minutes later he was shaking hands with Sibbold, Berdan and Pollock, delivering the message of peace.

"That's good hearin' believe me!" declared Sibbold. "Them gunmen said Sudley had sent 'em, to help us fight through to the range, because he'd failed in his efforts at peacemakin'. Where's Sudley now?"

Ken told him the truth of the matter. He didn't linger, for he was worried about old Cale. The jubilant stockmen were boarding the train as Larison turned back toward Sacaton, driving the pack horse with the load of ammunition. Ken observed his range neighbors gathered about the distant trees. He was glad he couldn't see what was taking place.

He still wore a moody expression when he encountered Sue Higgins at the edge of town.

"There'll be war?" she asked anxiously.

"No war, Sue," he replied. "Dacer's crowd is cleaned up. Neil was there, on the wrong side. He paid for his treachery."

Tears stood in Sue's eyes. She looked away, then back at the sober-faced Ken. "You've no regrets. You did all that any man could to straighten him out. He just had to go his pace."

"I want to see if Cale's still alive," said Ken. "Come with me?"

Sue nodded, keeping to the sidewalk as he started the horses onward at a slow pace. Passing the jail, Ken shouted to the guards to let Sheriff Callum and his deputies out, that the trouble was over. Hesitantly the guards turned to unlock the jail door. The lawmen, they knew, were going to be sore.

Cale Sudley, lying on Doc McCann's operating table, covered to the chin with a sheet, opened his eyes as Larison bent over him.

"I got the bullets out," informed McCann, at Ken's elbow. "He has an excellent chance."

Old Cale smiled and closed his eyes. "I heard it, Ken."

Sue was standing at the intersecting door. Ken drew her into the waiting room and closed the door. He gently cupped a hand beneath her chin, searched the delicate features with hungry gaze.

"What about us, Sue? I thought once that I had lost you. I took it pretty hard, though I tried not to let you see. Then things happened, and I began buildin' up hope again."

"When I returned Neil's ring, he passed out of my life, Ken. Whatever feeling I had for him died that day."

Ken said eagerly, "Then—"

"I love you, Ken. I'm not certain it wasn't you, even from the first."

Because a double-crossing pard sold Sid Luke down the river to split the bounty on him, crooked Luke found himself out on a limb that spanned a . . .

Trigger Torrent

By Gunnison Steele

SID LUKE got slowly to his feet, the firelight dancing redly on his thin dark features. His eyes were coldly wicked as he stared at the broad back of the man who squatted several yards away, sloshing in a pail of water the tin utensils they'd eaten from a few moments ago.

"Get up, Brazil, and turn around," he said softly. "Or had you rather have it in the back?"

Brazil Mullen turned his massive head first, staring with his pale little eyes at Sid Luke. What he saw brought him heavily to his feet, turned him slowly about. Brazil was a big man with flat, dull features, slow of thought and movement.

"Why'd you say that, Sid?" he mumbled. "And why're you lookin' at me like that?"

Luke laughed, a low, bleak sound. His gun was still in its holster, and so was Brazil's, but that didn't bother him. Brazil would have had just as much of a chance without any gun at all.

"Can't you guess, Brazil? You're a stupid ape, but not that stupid. Where'd you go this afternoon?"

"Why, I scouted down through the hills, like you told me—"

"And who'd you meet up with?"

"Why—why, I didn't meet anybody. That is, nobody—"

His mumbles trailed off into silence, guilt plain on his heavy face. He knew,

with bitter certainty, that he shouldn't have tried to do what he had. Sid Luke was too smart for him. Sid had always planned the jobs, and let him do the dirty work.

"Can't even deny it, can you?" Luke sneered. "I'd been watchin' you, and I suspected you was up to somethin', so I followed you. I saw you meet this hombre, this deputy sheriff Bill Shann from Warhawk. I wasn't close enough to hear what you two said, but I could make a pretty close guess. Bill Shann's a deputy, but he's crooked as hell, a scalp hunter."

"Sid, honest I didn't—"

"Shut up, blast you! You was schemin' with Shann to turn me over to the law, to split the five thousand bounty on my head with that crooked lawdog. You think you'd have got a penny of it? You'd have got a bullet in the back, just like me if it'd worked, you dumb fool! You denyin' it?"

"What'd be the good?" Brazil blurted. "I was mad at you for that hidin' you give me last week when I spilled the hot coffee on you. I wanted to get even with you. You can't kill me, Sid—you need me to help with that Redpeak bank job down in the next county."

"I can do it alone. I'll take your horse, because you won't be needin' it any more. I'll pull it the same way I planned, only you won't be there to maybe bungle it."

"Honest, Sid, I won't ever try it ag'in—"

"I aim to make sure you don't!"

Luke's hand was a blur in the firelight.

Brazil Mullen fumbled for his own gun, but not even his dark, bitter hope for survival could hasten his draw. Luke's gun blazed and roared.

Brazil's powerful body jerked upright, and blood ran from his forehead over his face. He staggered backward, his boot heels hammering the hard earth, fighting to regain his balance. And then, as if a huge black hand had reached up and grabbed him, he vanished over the rim of the canyon atop which they had made their camp.

Sid Luke ran forward, and knelt, peering into the sable blackness of the canyon. He heard a splash far below. And, although he listened for a long while, he heard nothing else except the noisy gurgle of the stream on the canyon bed and the wind in the trees.

FOUR days later, and sixty miles to the south, Sid Luke rode fast out of Redpeak with hot lead snarling like angry wasps about him. Cursing his black luck, he reached the town's edge and spurred furiously toward the rough Devil's Gorge country ten miles to the west.

The bank holdup had been a failure. The cashier, rashly reaching into a drawer for a hidden gun, had forced him to flee with only a handful of money. The badly wounded cashier now lay back there on the bank floor. The gunshot had jarred the sleepy town awake.

As he paused atop a ridge two miles from Redpeak, Luke looked back and saw a number of mounted men streaming out of the town. He snarled at them, like a fly-pestered dog, and rode on. He had no fear of capture. He had laid his plans carefully, and even though the robbery attempt had failed, he would make good his escape.

He had operated in this rough, isolated section before. He knew that, still eight miles ahead, lay Devil's Gorge. This yawning chasm in the earth was narrow—in some spots no more than fifty feet in width—but deep, dropping a sheer two hundred feet to the roaring torrent of water on its boulder-slashed bottom. It was many miles in length.

There was no bridge across Devil's Gorge. And nowhere along this twenty-mile stretch of canyon directly ahead were the walls broken enough for man or beast to cross.

Sid Luke pushed his mount hard. Occasionally, as he topped ridges, he could see the sheriff's posse riding just as hard on his back trail. They would be jubilant. They would think they were driving him straight against Devil's Gorge, where it would be impossible for him to backtrack or go forward. Possemen would circle to the right and left, to cut off his escape in either direction along the canyon.

The killer grinned derisively. They probably considered him a stranger. They would think he didn't know about the huge fir tree which, years ago, had been felled on the near rim of the canyon so that it spanned a narrow section of Devil's Gorge. Men afoot wishing to cross the gorge without making the many-mile trip to a crossable spot, used this improvised bridge.

But Sid Luke knew about the tree, and it was the key to his entire scheme. He

would have to leave his horse on this side of the canyon and cross over afoot. But also the night before, in a thicket on the far side of the gorge near the crossing, he had cached another horse—the dead Brazil Mullen's horse, a big, fast beast.

Once across and on that fresh horse he could laugh at pursuit. The possemen might cross over, but they would be afoot. Before they could make the long detour he would be deep in the almost inaccessible Barriers beyond Devil's Gorge.

He spurred the dun relentlessly. Devil's Gorge was two miles ahead . . . now one . . . and then, abruptly, it yawned directly before him. He had ridden unerringly to the spot where the fir bridged the chasm.

Luke leaped from the exhausted dun, flinging a glance over his shoulder. The posse was not yet in sight. More leisurely, he approached the butt of the log where it lodged on the rocky canyon rim. Ninety feet away, its almost denuded top rested on the far rim.

The dark killer paused, one foot on the log, staring with awe down into the misty chasm, where the river roared and leaped over jagged boulders in a seething maelstrom of spray. Then he laughed with wicked triumph, placed his other foot on the tree and started across.

The voice of the cauldron below him, he thought with a shiver, was like the furious bellow of a huge, slimy monster. He kept his eyes on the log, roughened by the passage of many hobnailed boots, a yard ahead of him. He was thirty feet from the rim . . . now forty.

He was almost directly in the center when he felt the tree quiver under his feet the first time. Instantly alarmed, he glanced up—and the alarm seemed to become a frozen ball of fear inside him.

ON the far rim of the gorge was the figure of a man. It was Brazil Mullen, a bloodstained bandage about his bare head, demoniacal hate and triumph on his flat features. Brazil had a double-bitted ax in his hands, and his squat body swayed rhythmically as he chopped with powerful, frantic strokes at the thin top of the dead fir.

The tree shuddered again, seemed to sag a little—and Luke knew that, even before his arrival, Brazil had had the tree chopped almost in two. Brazil, knowing Luke's scheme, had laid a trap for him.

Sid Luke didn't take time to curse himself for not making absolutely certain that Brazil had died that other time. His voice thin with terror, he yelled, "Wait, Brazil—I'm crossin' over. We'll show them lawdogs how dumb they are. We'll be pards ag'in. I didn't mean you no harm."

Brazil turned his head, grinning, and looked at Luke, not missing a stroke. He shouted something that Luke couldn't catch. The log jerked sickeningly.

Sid Luke bawled, "You dumb, murderin' ape, get away from that log!" and snatched out his gun and blasted two quick shots.

Brazil reeled back from the log, clutching at his stomach, looking at Luke with hate in his eyes, but still grinning. Still grinning as his boot caught on something and he sprawled headlong over the rim into the canyon. His body turned over and over and seemed to fall with incredible slowness.

But the harm had been done. There was a grinding roar, and the top of the tree slid from its lodging place.

Luke screamed, whirled and leaped back along the log. The small end dropped lower. The dark killer dropped to hands and knees and clawed frantically along the tilted tree trunk. The trunk tilted steeper, started turning, falling.

Sid Luke was flung clear. The roaring, wet maw of Devil's Gorge seemed to yawn wide to receive him. . . .

The possemen, led by a tall old sheriff, rode up to the rim and dragged their horses to a halt. They had been just in time to see the log plummet into the gorge, carrying Sid Luke with it. They hadn't seen Brazil Mullen.

Momentarily held silent by awe, they stared down into the chasm. They could see the huge fir tree far below, looking like a sapling, being tumbled over and over by the churning torrent. There was no sign of any living thing.

Shaking his head, one of the possemen said, "That old fir had been there a long time. You reckon it finally got so rotten it just broke in two?"

"Could have been that, I reckon," the tall old sheriff agreed, staring grimly into Devil's Gorge. "Rottenness is a thing that corrodes and destroys even itself in time, whether it be in man, beast or tree!"

Of Mites and Men

By Joe Archibald

Butterball and Gabby, the West's pokiest cowpokes, figured their troubles were over when they hit the workless paradise of Celestial Heights. But it took the toughest labors of their lives to keep from graduating too suddenly to Kingdom Come itself.

GABBY SNEAD got out of his bunk one morning on a cowspread called the Doodlebug. He was all set to launch his daily gripe against a world that had too much work to be done in it and where not enough man-children were born with a million dollars to give them a headstart in life, when it occurred to him that this was the last day of the month. He and Butterball Epps had quit the night before.

"Butterball!" Gabby roared. "Git up quick as today we are free men!"

"Close up that hermit's cave you call a mouth!" a little fat man said, sticking his head inside. "I'm washed an' ready fer our last meal on this slave plantation!" Butterball dried his rolypoly face with the common towel and burst into song.

An hour and a half later, Gabby Snead and Butterball Epps said adios to the Doodlebug owner, Wimby Hatch.

"Good riddance!" Wimby yelped. "Snead, you talked so much you scairt the hens outa layin' eggs an' my moo cows from givin' milk. You, Epps, practically ate me into bankrupture. Don't never come back!"

"Pay no heed to the human totem pole," Gabby sneered. "He is just jealous he can't be independent like us. All he's

done for years is git himself loaded up with incumbencies like this two-bit ranch, a wife, three children, taxes an' a ulster in his stummick. Fer the last time, Hatch, adios!"

The indolent pair rode away. Wimby Hatch banged his hat down on the ground and stomped on it. He picked up a rock and threw it through the window of the ranchhouse. "What makes me so blasted ding-dong mad is that they was right!" he howled. "As dumb an' as lazy as them two jaspers are, they are smarter 'n' happier than me!"

Coming out onto a benchland where Doodlebug cattle grazed, Butterball put his thumb to his nose and waggled the fingers that went with it. "Nurse yourselves, you fleabit T-bones on the hoof. Fall into canyons an' step into gopher holes an' see if I care. The next cow I handle will be on the label of a corned beef tin. Come on, Gabby."

Gabby Snead threw a long leg over the saddlehorn, pulled a wad of bills out of his pocket and began to count. "Money is the root of all evil, Butterball, but if we could only pull up all the roots, there wouldn't be no evil, huh?"

"I figger we got about three hundred simoleons betwixt the two of us, Gabby," the fat waddy said. "If we live a plain temperate life, we shouldn't have to work fer six months. I wonder which direction we should go."

"We'll go toward them mountains off to the southwest, Butterball," Gabby said. "We'll live close to the sky an' git the alkali outa our lungs an' the smell of cows out of our noses. Maybe there is one of them places out here like in Tibet."

"Huh?"

"Fergot you wa'n't educated," Gabby Snead sniffed. "Tibet is somewhere in Asia, an' there is a place there where hombres never git old an' truck gardens an' fruit trees plant theirselves an' never dry up."

"Who brands the cows?" Butterball asked.

"Nobody. Everybody owns everythin'. The town is called Shaggy-La," Gabby said. "Folks sit under trees all day an' soak in comfort. If you feel thirsty you slap your hands together an' a jinni or a little elf comes up an' takes your order."

"Yesterday," Butterball said, "you went bareheaded in that hot sun. When we git to a cool stream, you better soak your brains in it, Gabby."

"Yep, that place has green grass when everythin' else fer miles around is covered with ice an' snow," Gabby droned on. "I read it in a magazine in the barber shop a week ago."

AT NOON, the mismated pair entered the dusty main street of a settlement labeled Pine Cone Crossing. Half of the frame shacks seemed to have been blown against the side of a bluff by a tornado. The One-Eyed Jack Saloon was perched on a sort of shelf. A ladder was the only means of entrance.

"I'm kinda tired," Butterball said. "Clap your hands, Gabby, an' call a elf."

"Don't try to be funny," Gabby said. "Alongside you, a orphan caught in a house burnin' down in the dead of night gives me stitches. Kind of a poverty-struck layout, ain't it?"

The cowpokes climbed the ladder to the saloon and found it to be a place that was quite cramped if more than four men got thirsty at the same time. A little bald-headed man with a prickly mustache leaned over the counter. There were three bottles of liquid refreshment on a shelf behind him. A spider seemed to be the busiest creature in the whole place as it went on spinning a big web over the fly-spotted mirror.

"Er, hate to bother you," Gabby said. "Me an' my pardner would like a drink."

"Two dollars each," the barkeep said as he poured the strong elixir.

"Wha-a-t?" Butterball protested.

"Don't have to drink," the barkeep said. "Only way we kin get back to solvency. Town was raided by badmen a month ago. They took every last dollar we had. Our life savin's. Bud Hook lost sixty-five dollars. Eight towns was cleaned out by Plat-Eye Poggin an' his partners in less'n two weeks. They must be traveling with close to a thousan' dollars in cold hard cash!"

"Git a look at the outlaws?" Butterball asked.

"They was all masked," an hombre with a droopy mustache offered. "Got a description of Poggin, though. Medium height, dark hair, an' wears dungarees rolled down low over his boots."

"He'll sure git caught bein' so different than most men," Gabby sniffed.

"Place to have chuck in this semi-ghost town?"

"The Ideal Rest-rant," the barkeep said. "You hurry an' you kin have meat. Ike Sloat shot a wild goat this mornin'."

"Let's pilgrim," Butterball whispered. "If these jaspers git a idea we are men of means—"

Gabby was already on his way out and backing up to descend the ladder. Neither of the cowpokes drew a full breath until they were three miles from Pine Cone Crossing. "You know somethin', Butterball," Gabby said. "That was cold tea in them bottles!"

"Nobody should be able to carry two dollars worth of cold tea," the corpulent one groaned. "We don't git out of these parts, we will be as poor as a churchmouse without no church over its head!"

Gabby pulled up and looked toward the clouds. "Top of mountains peekin' up above 'em, Butterball. Lookit the pretty colors on them rocks. It is rainin' up there, but that peak stays dry. There's a sign on that tree up ahead. Let's see what it says."

The sign shook in the breeze. The letters were nearly washed away but Butterball managed to decipher them. He said aloud, "Celestial Heights. Eleven miles. The closest town to Kingdom Come. The Rev. Exodus Ellwell, Founder. 189— that last number is wiped off, Gabby."

"Wonder if anybody lives up there, Butterball," Gabby said. "Is that a eagle or a angel I see flutterin' around atop that cloud?"

"I'm game to take a look if you are, Gabby."

"This bronc can't fly," the talkative man said doubtfully. "Figure we'll have to carry the horses more'n half the way up. But who knows, Butterball? It may be Shaggy-La."

"I ain't Mahoomit," the fat man said. "I can't make that mountain come down an' git me, so let's start up an' git it, huh?"

GABBY SNEAD and Butterball Epps, consumed by curiosity and intrigued with the unknown, climbed and climbed until their broncs huffed and puffed from almost a sitting position, the angle became that steep. Once, both broncs started sliding backwards. The waddies jumped clear of the saddles and dug their heels in and pulled hard on the straps. "Only halfway, Butterball," Gabby panted. "S-see w-what that s-s-sign s-s-says!"

"Fer a second I thought a snake was hissin' at me," Butterball gulped. "Er, it says, 'Take Heart, Pilgrims! Don't Give Up! The Way to Paradise Ain't Easy!'"

"I feel lifted up awready," Gabby said. "I wish somethin' would make the broncs feel the same way. Well, I figger we kin ground-anchor 'em here near these jackpines. Some wild lettuce growin' here. Once they get vittles they'll have the strength to climb up after us. Let's gird our loins an' make the promised land, Butterball."

"I hope it promises more'n I think," the fat man choked out, and started climbing again. Ten times the waddies stopped to rest. Then, at dusk, they dragged themselves up to a high dizzy shelf and stared at an old wooden bridge that spanned a great chasm in the lofty topography. On the other side of the bridge was a cluster of old buildings, the roofs of which scraped a cloud. Living creatures were moving about. There was another board sign at the other end of the bridge. It said, *Welcome, Hardy Pilgrim, You Made it!*

"You think that bridge'll hold me, Gabby?" Butterball asked dubiously. "Kinda rickety."

"Only one way to find out. I figger the Lord wouldn't let you git all the way up here an' then kick your boots out from under you. Ain't you got no faith?"

"I would have if I didn't have so much weight," Butterball sighed and wiped worry dew from his rotund countenance. "Look, they're wavin' to us, Gabby! Look out! Er, what was that?" Butterball got to his feet again. Gabby said, "A big eagle. It nearly took my hat off. Well, let's cross the bridge."

Butterball had a bad moment. The old bridge groaned, squeaked, and swayed. Just as he planted a boot on the hard floor of Celestial Heights, a welcoming committee surged forward.

"Greetin's!" a willowy hombre with a face as long as a mule's, said. "The population of this lofty paradise is now fourteen. I am the Lord Mayor here. Let's go to the council house."

"Well, they got no wings, Gabby. I was afraid fer a minute we got shot somewheres down there an'—"

"Shut up, Butterball. You got a saloon

here?" the skinny man asked the Lord Mayor.

"Would it be close to Paradise if we didn't? Follow me, Brethren."

The Celestial Heights saloon was a little square frame building with a roof sagging in. An hombre with a scowl and a scar on his face banged a bottle down in front of the tired, bewildered pair. "One drink is the limit, as even you jaspers should know how hard it is to bring stuff up here."

Butterball and Gabby were thankful for the strong stuff that brought tears to their eyes and lifted their hair up as if it was starched. The Lord Mayor immediately took them in tow and led them to the council house, a structure perched right on the lip of a thousand foot drop. He immediately got down to business.

"Gents, I am knowed here as the Shepherd, an' don't either one of you jaspers dare ast me if I ever kept sheep. You abide by the rules as was set down in Celestial Heights throughout the ages, we don't know how many. First thing, everything here belongs to everybody else. In short, every pilgrim arriving here has to turn over his worldly goods to the common treasury, *sabe?* What you jaspers got?"

"Well, ha ha," Butterball choked out. "We didn' intend to stay long. Just dropped in fer a snort. Didn't we, Gabby?"

"Darned tootin'," the skinny cowpoke hastily agreed.

THE council members laughed. The Shepherd laid bare as worldly a forty-five as Gabby and Butterball had ever squinted an eye at. "Some folks never stop bein' selfish an' greedy," the long-faced man said solemnly. "Up here we expect gents to give willingly. But if they don't, we judge 'em swift an' then throw them off our paradise, where they become mortal remains somewheres on the wicked world below. Git the prayer book out. We don't send gents out of here without a decent—"

"I got about one hundred an' fifty dollars," Gabby quickly yelped.

"The same," Butterball said deep down in his fat stomach, at the same time getting a whiff of polecat smell.

"That's better," the Shepherd said. "Hand it over. When anybody needs anything in Celestial Heights, he makes out a slip what it costs, then draws it out of the bank. That is what paradise is, gents. We set it up here awhile ago. Nobody can envy what the other gent has an' everybody is equal. An' give us the hoglegs as all is peace in our midst."

Gabby and Butterball turned their opulence and artillery over to the Shepherd. The hombre went out with two of his council members. Butterball staggered to the window and looked out. He saw nothing but empty space and his brain sunfished. He spun around and sat down on an old canned goods box and surveyed the citizens around him. Three or four of them looked as happy as so many tomcats on their way in a sack to a deep river.

"They—er—return our dinero when we leave, huh?" Gabby asked.

"Whoever heard of anybody leavin' paradise?" a moon-faced man with a smirk like a stalking cougar's asked. "Only one sure way out—across the bridge. Makes an awful sound when you cross it, an' the Shepherd grabs a Winch an'— He figgers to save folks in spite of theirselves."

"I never hankered to be saved," Butterball complained.

"One other way if a gent wants to try it. On one side here, about fifty foot down, there's a river that winds down to the world below. Deepest river I ever saw an' full of cataracts an' whirlpools. Let's see, what was the name of the hombre who tried it?"

The Shepherd returned, his long face warped by a pleased grin. "Ah, it has been a bountiful day, Brethren. Let us pray that more tired pilgrims will want to climb nearer to Kingdom Come. Show our new repentants where they'll hive up."

Butterball and Gabby were led to a little ramshackle abode on one edge of Celestial Heights from which they could hear the roaring of the lofty waterway fifty feet below. There was an old straw pallet, a broken chair and a lot of empty cans and bottles heaped up in one corner.

"Paradise, huh?" Butterball gulped out when they were alone. "I'd hate to sample Tophet, Gabby. What you think, huh?"

"It's a loco lodge," the skinny man said. "Or elst we are in the clutches of owlhooters. We are destitute again. Fer two months we worked at menial labor, an' a shepherd shears us of it quicker'n

if it was wool. Look, let's try it out. We'll go an' ast to draw out five or ten dollars as we want to have grub."

"A good idea," Butterball said. "I didn't figure you had any in you."

The cowpokes emerged from their humble wikiup and inquired of the first citizen of the lofty community they met as to the whereabouts of the Shepherd's bank. A pointing finger sent them toward the largest edifice of Celestial Heights. They entered, hats in hand, and saw the long-faced hombre sitting at a table, a bottle at his elbow.

"Er—we have to git chuck," Gabby said. "We figure five dollars apiece ought to be enough—"

"Everybody eats the same place an' the same grub!" The Shepherd, alias the Lord Mayor, snapped. "End of every month we take so much out of the treasury to git more supplies. You'll hear a Colt go off twice when it is time to partake of sustenance. Don't break in here again, *sabe?* Unless you are announced!"

"Er, we didn't know," Butterball said and dropped his hat. When he picked it up he did not notice a piece of paper sticking to a gob of pitch that had smeared the crown of it on the way up to the lofty town. Not until they were back in their tumbled little shack did Gabby bring Butterball's attention to it.

Butterball tore the strip of paper loose, was about to crumple it up and toss it away when letters on it nearly drew his eyes out of their sockets. "G-Gabby, look! This piece of paper says—it says, 'Boogoo County First National Bank'!"

Gabby looked. His face became as pale as a trout's bosom. "Come from off a stack of legal tender, Butterball. Y-you know somethin'?"

"Yep. An' wisht I didn't. That gent is Plat-Eye Poggin. He's got a cast in one eye. When I first saw him I told myself not to dare to think. All his ill-got gains is in this cloud hideout. No posse'd ever git up here on broncs. Lot of curious cusses will keep coming up here an' they'll git robbed. Like us. Like some of them galoots we saw out there. Notice how scared they are? Don't dare say nothin'. They're lost souls."

"Don't say that, Butterball! Oh, it was you got me up here. I wish you had been born somewheres in China 'stead of where I had to meet you."

"Huh? Look, you squawkin' magpie, you was lookin' fer Shaggy-La, not me. You got it awright. What's ours belongs to everybody but us. All we got to do is lay under the trees an' never git old. It's a fake, as I feel thirty years older'n when I clumb up here!"

"No use bitin' at each other, Butterball," Gabby said. "We got to try an' escape!"

"Even if that bridge'd hold me up the second time," Butterball groaned, "I never could outrun a Winch bullet even if the goin' is all downhill fer more'n a thousan' feet. Well, Gabby, clap your hands an' call a elf or a jinni."

"Don't be silly, Butterball!"

"I am desperate enough to git superstitious," Butterball sniffed and slapped his fat hands together.

The old door swung open. A little figure slipped in and put a finger to his lips. "Shhh!" he said.

"My gosh!" Gabby choked out and his hat popped toward the ceiling. "An elf!"

BUTTERBALL EPPS was paralyzed as he watched the little hombre in the darkness that was beginning to creep into the old shack. His head only came up to Gabby's gunholster. He wore a derby hat and a dark grey store suit. The stub of an old cigar jutted from under a little button-nose. "Look, pals," the diminutive visitor whispered. "I'm in the same boat!"

Butterball gasped out, "I just touched him, Gabby. He's real."

"What you think I was?" the little man scoffed. "I'm Little Joe Thumb an' traveled with a circus. I got in a scrap with the fire-eater over the fat lady, plugged him, an' had to hit the road. I had a hundred bucks on me, an' that dirty crook lifted it all. I live in an old barrel just outside this dump."

"Got any ideas?" Gabby asked, still gaping. The little man sat down in a corner and chewed his rag of a cheroot.

"Just one," Little Joe sniffed. "I been tryin' to knock off an eagle or a buzzard with a slingshot. Want a pair of wings—"

"You know a li'l cuss like you has a chance if you could git a pair," Gabby said.

"Let's stop clownin'," Little Joe Thumb snapped, "or do you all want to stay up here an' live like birds. There must be a brain amongst three of us. Two of us anyways."

"You lookin' at me, you li'l squirt?" Gabby Snead said. "Don't git sarcastic or I'll toss you back in your barrel."

"Barrel," Butterball said to himself. "Barrel."

"What you mumblin' about?" Gabby asked his partner.

"How big is the barrel?" Butterball wanted to know.

"It's a big one, like hard cider comes in," Little Joe said. "Steel hoops, an' the staves are so thick an' swelled up not a drop of rain has fallen on me. Wonder how it was rolled up here. Most likely way back somebody built it right here, huh? What you lookin' at me like that for, Fatso?"

"Like my partner here, I been in barber shops," Butterball said. "Read in a magazine where a gent went over Niagara Falls in a barrel. Now, Little Joe, we ain't got no chance of ever escapin' here while that owlhoot an' his cronies hide out from the sheriffs. At least not without dinero. Bet there's lots of rewards out fer Poggin an' the bank money he stole. There is one way we might save ourselves from ruin, physical an' financial."

"What is it, you keg of hogfat?" Little Joe asked. "I'm game for almost anythin'."

"Well, we got to figure out a cover fer the barrel, Little Joe. Hook it on from the inside so's you can fasten it down tight an' make it waterproof," Butterball explained. "Lots of rags here to stuff in with you so's you won't git bruised up by the cataracts!"

Gabby Snead drew his breath in through his teeth.

"Nothin' doin'!" Little Joe Thumb said, and got up and walked out.

Bang!

Little Joe dove back in, sliding on his stomach all the way to Butterball's feet. There was a burst of laughter from out in Celestial Heights. Little Joe got up and poked a finger through one of the holes in his derby. "The way the Shepherd amuses himself," Little Joe gulped. "Say, Butterball, let's go over that stuff about the barrel again."

"Awright. Let's look at the barrel," the fat cowpoke said.

Butterball nodded with satisfaction when he saw Little Joe Thumb's abode. "Would almost hold me, Gabby. Now, what we got to do next is git a cover made. You ask the Shepherd—er—that owlhoot polecat if you kin have a door on your barrel as the wind comes in an' half freezes you to death at night."

"Guess he won't suspect nothin'," Gabby said.

LITTLE JOE THUMB got permission. There was another hole in the crown of his derby when he managed to dive in through the door of the old shed where the Shepherd said he would find some old tools. Gabby and Butterball watched the abbreviated citizen work, helped hunt for old rusty staples and bits of strong wire that could be bent into hooks. They were interrupted by a commotion outside. They went out and saw a stranger walking across the bridge. The Shepherd met him at the threshold of Celestial Heights.

"Fancy!" the newcomer said. "A city above the clouds! I shall write it in a book. I am a professor of anthropology and archaeology, my friends."

"You still ain't very smart if you only know it," Gabby Snead muttered.

Once more the lord of the roost went through his farcical ritual. When it was over, the professor walked out of the council house minus his bankroll, a diamond stickpin and a gold watch. He stood there in his swallow-tailed coat, striped trousers and buttoned shoes, appearing very puzzled over it all.

"We must be in a bunkhouse somewheres an' dreamin' this," Butterball gulped.

"Maybe. But it ain't no bunk," Little Joe Thumb said as he rounded the end of a piece of board with a jackknife blade.

"Remember," Butterball said. "Git all the sheriffs you can, little feller."

Gabby Snead shook his head and sat down on an old nail keg. "Supposing he don't make it, huh?"

"I'll clap my hands again," Butterball sniffed. "Shut up, worry wart!"

A frightened citizen crawled into the cowpokes' hut at dusk. His teeth made sounds like Mex castanets. When he tried to stand up his knees gave way under him like two wet ropes.

"We're doomed, gents," he pushed out with difficulty. "I overheard the Shepherd, who is really that outlaw, Plat-Eye Poggin. He was talkin' with his partners. They're plannin' on lightin' out, blowin' the bridge up behind 'em, an' leavin' us

here for a buzzard banquet. Whisky an' supplies givin' out, they said. What'll we do?"

"Pray," Gabby Snead gulped. "You can't fly an' you won't never git over the bridge quicker'n a Winch slug. We're—"

Butterball stepped on the skinny man's toes. "We're—er—in the same kettle of catfish, Mister," he said. "We got a good start to Heaven anyways."

"Well, adios," the gloomy one said. "I'll try an' face it like a man."

The darkness thickened. Lights flicked out in Celestial City. Snores criss-crossed atop the high tor. Gabby Snead and Butterball helped Little Joe Thumb into the big barrel and put the cover over it.

"Happy journey, Li'l Joe," Butterball said as he heard the circus fugitive hook the lid down. "Help me roll him to the edge, Gabby. Hear anythin'?"

"Nope." They tipped the barrel over and began rolling it slowly to the edge of Celestial Heights. On the brink they listened for a moment to the roar of the river below. Butterball put his lips to a little hole in the side of the barrel and said, "Time to change your mind, pardner." Then he put his ear to the hole. Little Joe said, "Let'er go. Them bullets have been comin' nearer to my noggin every time!"

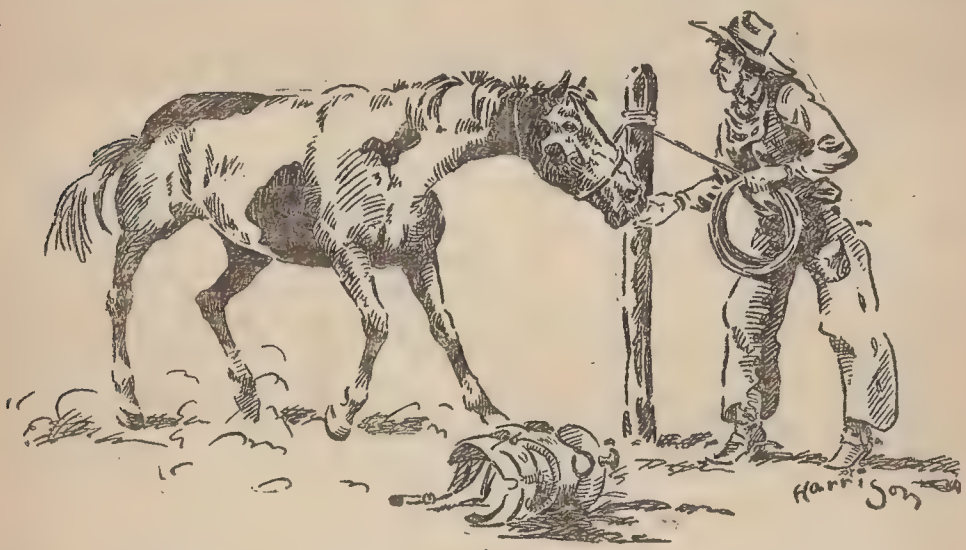
"Awright," Butterball said to Gabby, "Give her a push!"

The barrel plopped down through the darkness. Gabby and Butterball winced at the splatting, splashing sound it made when it hit the water. They turned quickly and scurried back to their wikiup, thankful for the heavy mist that began to boil in and over Celestial Heights.

"I got my fingers crossed fer the li'l jasper," Butterball said. "That'll be a awful rough trip to the world below."

"What kin he lose, huh?" Gabby whispered. "He stayed here, he'd—I wish that barrel held two hombres. I wouldn't be here, by cripes! Wonder how much dinero these curly wolves have got, huh?"

"Work don't seem so horrible to me right now, Gabby. Think of a nice cattle spread all safe an' sound. Forty dollars comin' at the end of the month. Snug in our bunks, knowin' we got a chance to live 'til eighty if we want. I'll never shirk honest toil no more, Oh Lord! Hear this miser'ble sinner—"



"Ditto," Gabby Snead squeaked out of a dry throat.

THE night passed. All the next day and yet another night and Little Joe Thumb had not returned. With dusk moving in over the strange community once more, Butterball and Gabby Snead saw signs that chilled them to the marrow of their shaking bones. Plat-Eye Poggin was dumping supplies into a big gunny sack. With three owlhoots standing guard with Winches, he dragged a heavy canvas sack out of a tacky building.

"They're going tonight, Butterball!"

"An' we'll be bacon an' eggs for buzzards right soon, Gabby. Of all the cold-blooded owlhooters I ever met up with—"

Two shots rang out. It was the Shepherd's call to his flock. "Let's go over an' hear our death sentence, Butterball," Gabby groaned. "Our goose is sure cooked."

Plat-Eye Poggin grinned as the citizens of the lofty benighted settlement pushed closer. "Just breakin' up paradise, gents," he said. "But don't worry none. You'll git to Kingdom Come, all of you faithful. We don't figger we are good enough to meet our Maker yet, me an' my partners. In about five minutes we cross the bridge. Don't nobody dast follow. After we git across, then you jaspers kin foller—if you got wings!"

The meanest, nastiest laughter Butterball and Gabby ever heard swept across the mountain top. Plat-Eye Poggin led the way to the bridge. One of his outlaws carried a heavy sledge hammer. Butterball knew that three wallops from it would knock the far end of the old bridge loose from its posts.

"He means to leave us stranded here?" the professor squawked in a rusty frightened voice.

"He does!" Gabby said. "Butterball, let's shake. Maybe we won't meet on the other side, which is awright with me."

"You an' your Shaggy-La!" the fat man squeezed out of his throat as he saw the outlaws approach the bridge. "Well, it worked once before!" Butterball clapped his hands smartly together. "Li'l elf, if you are there—"

Crack! Spa-a-a-ng!

Plat-Eye Poggin's hat leaped clear of his head. Splinters came off the bridge and flew into his ugly face. Gabby Snead jumped high into the air and howled, "Look! It is Little Joe Thumb, Butterball. He's got a Winch, an' is workin' on that polecat. He is Horatio at the Bridge!"

Crack! Plat-Eye dropped the canvas sack and dove for safety which at the moment was in the wrong place. The curly wolf went through the bridge railing and soared into space. A stream of lead was keeping the other three badmen dancing.

Little Joe Thumb led five men wearing stars across the rickety bridge. Poggin's wolves threw down their hardware and asked for mercy.

Butterball ran out to gather Little Joe Thumb in his arms. "You come back, li'l friend! Easier'n goin' down, huh?"

"It was one heck of a trip, Fatso!" the little man gulped. "When the barrel finally broke up against a big rock I was tossed ashore an' walked aroun' in a circle for six hours 'fore they found me. Didn't remember my name until this mornin', so they was a li'l late gettin' here. One thing you didn't know. How did that baby eagle git in the barrel with me? I'm so full of holes I couldn't hold a bucket of gravel. Guess if it wa'n't fer that company I'd gone loco. I got square with that badman, hah?"

The canvas sack yielded nearly four thousand dollars in legal tender and jewelry. Hours later, when the liberated inhabitants of Celestial Heights reached the nearest worldly settlement of Dogleg Gap, Butterball and Gabby, backed up by witnesses, retrieved their wealth. They were not interested in tarrying in the immediate vicinity, even though it might mean that they would split a reward here and there. They got on their broncs and rode out of Dogleg Gap, making sure they took a trail that went ever downward instead of toward the clouds.

"I'll do the rest of my climbin' when I curl my toes up," Butterball vowed.

Just eighteen days later, the cowpokes sat in a saloon in a cowtown far to the south, mellow with liquid refreshment and in cogitating moods.

"Just happened, is all, Gabby," the fat cowpoke said. "Coincidence! Little Joe just happened to arrive just as I clapped my hands. Like this—"

Gabby Snead grabbed Butterball around the neck just as the sound of two fat hands striking together made an echo somewhere in back. In through the door came Little Joe Thumb, dressed in a new checkered suit and a fresh grey derby hat, a big cigar jutting out of his mouth.

He caught sight of the waddies and hopped toward them. "Well, if it ain't Fatso an' Rattle-tongue. Put'er there—huh?"

Butterball and Gabby fled. Ten miles away they drew rein and flicked gobbets of sweat off their faces. "It still ain't so!" Butterball choked out.

"Of course, Butterball. But don't go slappin' them lunchhooks of your'n no more!" Gabby Snead yelped. "I don't believe in ghosts nor elfs but I'm afraid of 'em. Let's make camp."

Dynamite in the Scabbard

By John Richard Young

Although Eric Manning could teach the cowtown kids their three R's, he hadn't spent much time studying sixes. And when death and destruction struck, Manning had to bone up on his saber savvy to give lessons to a lobo.

ERIC MANNING, one foot on the brass rail while he munched a cold beef sandwich on rye, warily pretended not to be listening while the blond giant down the bar finished telling an admiring knot of cronies:

"So I says to the runt, 'Feller, you know who I am? Kurt Fromm's my name and I run this town, and if you ain't out of here in one hour I'll give you a free hole in boot hill.' Then I belts him plumb over the hitchrail. Busted his damned jaw."

Amid the bar-flies' raucous laughter Eric Manning recognized the voice of Town Marshal Jake Peters. He glanced sidewise down the bar. The marshal, standing beside Kurt Fromm, looked already half drunk though it was only noon. Kurt Fromm, towering lionlike above the others, looked as if he was curing a hangover by building up an-

other one and was spoiling for a fight.

Eric Manning decided that he'd better finish his beer and get out. In the Army he had thoroughly disliked swaggering, maul-fisted Lieutenant Kurt Fromm; here in Montana, since he had settled in Bison a year ago, he found himself too often stepping carefully just to avoid trouble with the self-styled "boss of Front Street."

The saloon, one of a dozen along Front Street, smelled fetid and sour. The usual clientele was a mongrel assortment of dirty buffalo hunters and skinners, freighters, bullwhackers, gamblers, saddle bums, gutter bums—all the roughneck riffraff of a prairie boom town sprung up in the wake of shining steel knifing westward across the continent.

Six noons a week, during the long summer vacation when he worked as checker and bookkeeper in the buffalo-hide yard of Kendricks & Company down near the Union Pacific siding, Eric Manning ate here because, for the price of two beers, he could help himself to a solid free lunch.

IN BISON no one thought anything of a schoolteacher patronizing a saloon. Eric Manning was the only one within a radius of two hundred miles—"an almighty eddicated young feller," regarded by most of the frontier people as "right queer" because of his odd passion for teaching children their three R's, if necessary free of charge, when he could more profitably have worked in the hide-yard all year around.

He had built his own one-room schoolhouse near the edge of town, and already had eight pupils promised him before he learned that Bison, at least that shady portion of it south of Front Street, belonged to Kurt Fromm—Kurt Fromm whose captain he had been in the Union cavalry during the war.

"Hey, perfessor!" Kurt Fromm's voice boomed down the bar. "How's the teachin' business? How's the old schoolmarm?"

Eric Manning held his lean face impassive as he turned and stared. The big man's tapering torso bulged inside a fringed buckskin shirt. He wore a pearl-gray sombrero banded with silver conchas and two white-handled six-shooters. With his blond mane and fleering tawny eyes he reminded Eric Manning of a lion.

Manning said evenly, "Quite all right," and finished his beer. His throat felt tight, his stomach jumpy. Four years of war had given him his fill of fighting, but there were still times . . .

Kurt Fromm said to the marshal, "Too damn many nuts drifting around the country."

Eric Manning turned carefully and went out through the swing doors, tight-lipped. The churning sensation in his stomach died down. He lingered in the shade of the wooden awning, squinting in the noon glare as he lit a cigar. A rumbling freight wagon raised a pall of powdery dust; horses filling the hitchrails stamped fretfully at swarming flies. A cowhand, a mere boy, sat on the elevated board walk a dozen steps off, his eyes glazed in drunken stupor.

Across the street men and women wove a shifting pattern, moving in and out of stores. On that side of Front Street there were no saloons. Down the middle of the street stretched an invisible line, south of which respectable women never stepped. The women who lived south of the line had the right to shop across the street, but if one ventured beyond the shops Marshal Jake Peters or his deputies, Savage and Barr, hustled her back over the line. It was an unwritten law.

Eric Manning picked out a trim figure in blue threading swiftly among the shoppers across the street. He watched her turn into Stoeger's butcher shop and his lips tightened around his cigar. He had nothing to offer to Rita Allison except a one-room schoolhouse, and she had her brother Johnny to take care of—quite a job, he reflected, in Bison.

It was a hell of a town for kids to grow up in, a fetid cancer on the brown bosom of the prairie. You could smell it a mile out on the range—the odor of flesh-rotting buffalo hides mingled with the sourness of stale beer and liquor permeating the saloons that never closed their doors.

In the yards of cribs and saloons solidly lining Third and Fourth Streets garbage lay rotting and piles of empty bottles were strewn about. Nobody bothered over what kids did with themselves. But Eric Manning knew that the things they saw and heard on furtive, adventurous forays south of the line stayed with them.

"Damn it to hell!" a childish voice said indignantly. "That ain't the way you play faro!"

MANNING, startled, recognized that voice. Stepping left, he glanced around the corner of the saloon. In the space between the Golden Spur and the saloon next door crouched a group of six boys.

Petey White and Johny Allison were the center of the group. Between them on the ground lay a weird contraption—a crude faro layout contrived from a cigar box and an old piece of green cloth on which were drawn in chalk and crayons all the thirteen cards that made up the "spread." On several of the card faces lay a jackknife, a penny, a top, a ring made of a bent horseshoe nail, a slingshot—the bets.

The boys stared up at Manning defiantly, angered at his intrusion. He knew he was treading on delicate ground as he stepped into the gangway and squatted in their midst.

"Where did you get that, Petey?"

Petey White was as dark as an Indian; his black eyes now were sullen. "Aw," he said gruffly, "made it."

They waited for him to go away. Manning studied the layout. "Who showed you how? It's quite a professional job, Petey."

The lads exchanged astonished glances. Petey White grinned; his teeth were yellow with tartar. "I made it all my own self," he said proudly, "but Ace Kreuger showed me how. He deals one of the shifts for Lizard Thompson in Dutch Henry's. Ace says 'at's how he got his start, with a cigar box layout."

"How did Ace happen to show you?"

"Aw, I run errands an' stuff for his friend, Crazy Mary. She runs a store over on Third Street." The swarthy child's eager voice livened with enthusiasm. "When I grow up I'm gonna be one of the slickest faro dealers ever. You bet!"

Eric Manning felt himself groping helplessly with nothing solid to get hold of. His authority stopped at the schoolhouse door; and even if this wasn't vacation time, he felt sure, the pressure of authority would have been a tactical error.

Johnny Allison, as ruddy blond as Petey was swarthy, drew aimless designs in the dust with his forefinger.

"Do you want to deal faro when you grow up, too, Johnny?"

Johnny Allison lifted defiant blue eyes. "It'd be more fun than teachin' an old school—and more money, too."

"Does your sister know you hang around down here, Johnny?" He looked at red-haired Tommy Douglas. "Does your mother, Tom? What would your pa say, Petey?"

An indignant chorus bombarded him: "Aw, gee!" "Now you're gonna tell 'em!" "My ol' man don't care!" They felt betrayed.

"No," Eric Manning reassured them, "I won't tell, if you'll promise to stay on the north side of Front Street." He glanced at each boy. "How about it, Pete? Johnny, your sister's over in Stoeger's. How about helping her carry parcels—and staying on that side?"

A voice behind him said loudly, "Don't let any two-bit soldier boy bluff you, boys. Tell the old schoolmarm to go to hell."

Manning looked over his shoulder up into Kurt Fromm's face. The giant stood spread-legged at the entrance of the gangway, thumbs hooked into his gunbelt. He eyed Petey White's layout and laughed. "Faro, by hell!" He reached into his pocket and tossed a handful of silver over Manning's head into the dust at the boys' feet. "There's something real to play for, lads. Go ahead."

IN ONE synchronized movement Manning stood up pivoting as he rose, took a long step forward and slammed his left fist against Kurt Fromm's jaw. The big man reeled back three quick steps before he sat down hard in the dust. Two men, passing on the sidewalk, stopped to stare.

Manning flung his cigar away and took one step before Kurt Fromm, twisting sideways, drew his right-hand gun. Manning, thinking only of the boys behind him in the line of fire, involuntarily froze, braced for the crash of the .45. But Kurt Fromm, propped on his left hand, held the cocked gun on him. Fury sparked tiny lights in his tawny eyes. He said softly:

"Feller, I've been waiting for this a long time. For you I don't need a gun." He drew one leg under him and stood up, his whole movement smooth as flow-

ing oil. "I'm going to beat your brains to mush."

He stepped sidewise up onto the sidewalk, holstered his gun and began unbuckling his belt. "Come out here, Manning, out here in the street. People must see this." He handed his guns to one of the two staring men. Already a crowd was gathering. Kurt Fromm stepped down off the walk, hung his sombrero on a saddle horn, backed toward the middle of Front Street, calling:

"Out here, Manning; there's room to bounce."

Eric Manning felt the small boys' eyes on him, knew that here was his chance—a slim one. Placing his hat atop Kurt Fromm's, he sauntered out into the glaring dusty street, as if he did not know this might be the last time he would ever walk erect, a whole man.

Kurt Fromm watched him out of unblinking leonine eyes until they were hardly arm's length apart. Then with the explosive speed of a lion he charged. Manning sidestepped, swinging. A maul-like fist on the cheek staggered him, bells dinned in his ears. He speared his left into the big man's mouth. Kurt Fromm laughed snarlingly and bored in volleying with both fists. Manning gave ground as if he were being pounded with clubs.

He tried to box, to hold off and wear down this rushing giant, but Kurt Fromm had speed to match his power. He belted Manning with sledge-hammer blows that seemed to erupt from nowhere. He batted him the width of Front Street like a ball. Near a hitchrail he knocked Manning flat on his back, calmly waited for him to get up, then smashed him back across the street.

Only an inherent wiry toughness and courage enabled Manning to last more than a couple of minutes. He lasted ten. Kurt Fromm knew more dirty fighting tricks than the slender schoolman had ever imagined. The end came with crushing suddenness because Eric Manning had not thought to remove his tie. Fromm gathered it in his left hand, lifted a knee into Manning's belly and hit him three triphammer-quick blows on the jaw.

Eric Manning slid back to consciousness on a wave of pain. Through puffed lids he recognized Rita Allison bending over him, a heart-shaped face framed by ebony hair that gleamed in the sunlight streaming in through the curtainless windows of his schoolhouse. He lay in his own hard bunk in a corner.

"How is it?" Rita Allison said. Her voice was a murmuring, liquid music She laid a cool hand on his throbbing head when he tried to sit up. All the strength was drained out of him. "Deputies Savage and Barr brought you home," she told him. "They didn't even swear when I insisted on coming along."

His voice strained through the battered lips. "D'you see it?"

"Most of it. What under the sun made you do it?" Rita asked. "Did you think you could fight a buffalo bull?"

WITH an effort that shot lances of pain through his head, Eric Manning forced himself to sit up. He put his feet on the floor; the room rocked like a ship in a gale. But the shame his weakness filled him with was a trivial matter now: Rita Allison had seen him lying battered at Kurt Fromm's feet. He had failed. Women and small boys admired only winners.

"Ben Savage left a message for you," Rita said hesitantly. "Stay away from Front Street." She added too quickly, "It's the sensible thing to do, Eric."

Manning squinted at his bruised knuckles. "When I want Ben Savage's advice I'll ask for it."

"It was Kurt Fromm's advice."

"Thanks," he said. "It was kind of you to come."

Rita Allison's smoke-gray eyes turned angry, baffled. "Don't be a fool, Eric. Men like Kurt Fromm always get what's coming to them. You—"

"But they never get it soon enough to prevent the damage they do to other people's lives. Kurt Fromm can die—but his name lives as a symbol in the minds of small boys. They see only the white-handled guns, the buckskin shirt, the silver spurs. Glamor! High adventure! How do you kill that? How make them see what Kurt Fromm really was?"

"By getting yourself killed, of course," she said.

"If Front Street is safe enough for kids, it's safe enough for me."

Rita picked her bonnet off a chair. "All right, be headstrong." Manning knew then that she was ignorant of her brother and other kids hanging around Front Street. At the doorway she turned and asked, "Were you ever in the Army?

Fromm said something that made me wonder: 'Tell him he's not at Gettysburg now.' "

"We were in the same regiment. Cavalry. In a tight spot—one of them—we charged infantry with bayonets. Fromm stayed behind. As his captain, I had to prefer charges of cowardice. Charges were dropped, but Fromm challenged me to a duel. He expected pistols. I specified sabers. There was no duel." He shrugged, not interested. "Some men dread naked steel as others fear deep water. Not their fault, but they don't belong in the cavalry."

When she had gone, lying tiredly on his bunk, Eric Manning knew that he would have to go back to Front Street. He could not leave this thing unfinished. He could take a licking; no man could take a threat. Either that, or give up the school and go where no one would know him for a coward.

Yet, remembering the controlled speed of Kurt Fromm's draw even when he'd been stretched on the ground, he knew he was no more of a match for the big man with guns than with fists.

From a battered portmanteau under his bunk he dug out his old Army pistol. He snapped it several times at the oil lamp hanging from a rafter. It was a typical general issue pistol — hammer-spring stiff, trigger-pull heavy. The flapped holster was stiff, too deep, awkward, a mere carrying case. Kurt Fromm could put three or four bullets into him before he could even get that gun out.

He'd never been much interested in guns, until now.

MANNING sat in the doorway of the lonely schoolhouse, watching blue-gray shadows creep over the prairie as the sun went down. He ached all over, but in the morning, he decided, he'd go to the hide-yard and at noon walk up Front Street to the Golden Spur as usual. He was debating whether or not to wear his pistol when he sighted a horseman loping up the road from town.

He recognized the rider as Willy Drobz, a buck-toothed youth who did the filthy work of scraping hides in the yard. Willy was mounted bareback on a scrawny buckskin cart-horse, but he rode up and drew rein with the flourish of a king's courier.

"Boss sent me," he said, grinning, and held out a thumb-marked envelope. The envelope was heavy with a coin—a ten-dollar gold piece. Manning read the note enclosed:

Sir:

Enclosed please find in amt. one week's wages. Your Services with this Company are hereby terminated.

GEO. BALL, Esq.

He put the note and the coin into his pocket. "Willy, was Kurt Fromm in the yard this afternoon?"

"Naw," said Willy, grinning toothily. "But I seen him an' the marshal with the boss in the office."

"Did they seem to be arguing, Willy? Think now."

Willy pondered. "The boss seemed powerful het up over suthin', but he ca'med down sudden when the marshal stuck a gun in his face. I seen 'em through a winder."

"Thanks, Willy. You're a good boy."

His eyes were bleak as he watched the lad ride off. Without the hoarded money from the yard job, he could not last through the winter. With most of the long summer still ahead, he'd have to begin living off his scanty capital right now. Kurt Fromm was bent on driving him out; and if he was powerful enough to bulldoze George Ball, no other merchant in Bison would dare offer another job.

Eric Manning's thin face settled into harsh, driven lines. Well, tomorrow was another day. He walked rockily to his bunk and fell instantly asleep.

The frantic pounding on the locked door jerked him awake. He groped in darkness for his gun.

"Who is it?"

"M-m-me! Johnny Allison!"

Manning struck a match, saw by his watch that it was almost midnight and lit the lamp. When he opened the door, Johnny Allison almost fell into the room, gasping. The lad's face was sickly white; his eyes rolled with fright.

"M-Mr. M-Manning! P-Pety's been s-s-shot! The marshal's g-got him. I don't know—what to do. He's *dead!*" Johnny Allison began to cry hysterically.

"Dead?" Manning stared down at him blankly. "Sit down, son. Calm yourself. What happened?"

It was several minutes before Johnny could collect himself.

"Me and Petey White went down to Front Street after supper. Kurt Fromm told Petey this afternoon—after your fight—he'd give him an old faro layout. Well, we were sitting on the sidewalk where the lights were shining out from one of the saloons and playin' with it when all of a sudden we heard shootin', and there was Kurt Fromm and the Whistlin' Kid in the middle of the street bangin' away at each other.

"Kurt killed the Kid and one of his bullets hit Petey right in the chest." Johnny Allison's tears spilled over. "Petey was sittin' right close to me, yelling, 'Attaboy Kurt!' and the next second he fell over backwards, dead. I just up and ran. Now I'm scared to go home or to tell Petey's pa. I don't know what to do."

The marshal's small office was crowded. Town Marshal Jake Peters, at his desk, looked harassed, frightened. Deputies Ben Savage and Steve Barr flanked him protectively, their hard gunmen's eyes watching the crowd with a thinly veiled indifference.

MEN from the saloons stood about the small room, as if waiting for somebody to do something. Among them, hardly noticed by anyone, stood Petey White's father, a small, stoop-shouldered man with weak brown eyes and a ragged mustache under a bulbous, whisky nose. A widower, "Pop" White was a hostler at the OK Corrals, did odd jobs, and hung around saloons when he had a little money. He appeared numbed to oblivion of the canvas tarpaulin so obviously covering the small body in one corner.

Eric Manning said harshly from the doorway, "Where's Fromm?"

They stared as if he were the last person they had expected to meet there. Jake Peters said hesitantly, "Don't seem to be around. Why?"

"Because you're going to swear out a warrant for him," Manning said, "and see that he stands trial."

A stocky cowboy growled truculently, "You're damn right, Peters."

"Sure, sure," the marshal said hastily. "That's what I was gonna do. See if you can find Kurt, Steve. Better explain things to him—head off trouble. Kurt'll understand, I hope."

Kurt Fromm understood, and he was not wrong. He slept soundly in jail, and in the morning he paid a twenty-five dollar fine for "disturbing the peace." A half-dozen carefully coached witnesses, including the marshal and his two deputies, testified that his killing of the Whistlin' Kid had been done in self-defense. Petey White's death was dismissed as a lamentable accident. Judge Kenesaw Walther roundly censured Pop White for having allowed his son to run about in Front Street after dark, where children did not belong.

Kurt Fromm, grinning as he left the courtroom, halted beside old man White near the door. He clapped a meaty paw on the old man's bowed shoulder, said casually, "Tough luck, Pop. I'll pay the funeral expenses. We'll give the kid—Mickey was his name?—we'll give Mickey the biggest send-off this town ever saw. Here—for yourself. Buy a few drinks."

He passed out the doorway into the sunlight, leaving Petey White's father staring dumbly at five twenty-dollar gold pieces in his gnarled hand.

Eric Manning, standing with Rita Allison a few yards off, knew then that the end had come—the end of something, perhaps of himself. In Bison there was no law. Kurt Fromm was the law. Petey White's death would never have happened but for Kurt Fromm's corrupt reign. Therefore, Kurt Fromm and the rats surrounding him had to go.

At Fourth and Allen Streets, half a block from her house, he refused Rita Allison's invitation to dinner. "See that Johnny stays home tonight," he said, lifted his hat, and abruptly left her.

He walked three blocks down Fourth Street between small frame homes with family washings flapping on lines in the yards. The morning sunlight dazzled his bruised eyes and his stomach was a hard, quivering knot. He thought, turning east into Front Street, *I only wish I were brave.*

A dozen men at the bar in the Golden Spur fell abruptly silent when he stepped in. The bartender moved quickly toward him and said very low, swabbing the bar, "Pick another joint. Ain't healthy for you here."

Manning said clearly, "Where's Fromm?"

"You huntin' trouble?"

"I'm hunting Fromm. Is he in back?"

The bartender shrugged. "Your fu-

neral. Just walk right in, if you're plumb crazy."

MANNING walked down the barroom, glimpsing his own battered face in the fly-specked mirror, amid a blanketlike silence. He felt his thigh muscles trembling, but paused only a split second with his hand on the knob of the back room door. Then he pushed the door open, letting it swing free, and stopped flat-footed in the doorway.

Kurt Fromm, Jake Peters and Judge Kenesaw Walther made three points of a triangle around the table in the center of the small room. Kurt Fromm, between the others, directly faced the doorway. He was in the act of lifting a glass of whisky to his mouth.

"Getting paid, Judge?" Eric Manning said loudly enough for the men out at the bar to hear. "Or striking for a raise?"

Kurt Fromm with deliberate slowness lowered his glass to the table. He said wonderingly, "You," as if he doubted his eyes. "Come in," he added smoothly. "Shut the door."

"We'll leave the door open," Manning said. "I haven't got a gun on me now. I will have tonight. You be out of Bison by sundown. Don't ever come back." He glanced at the marshal and the judge. "That, gentlemen, includes you."

Kurt Fromm gaped as if he were looking at an archangel, complete with feathers. Jake Peters said, "Kurt, you plumb addled this pilgrim's brains."

Eric Manning had to force himself to speak slowly and keep his voice low: "Fromm, yesterday when I was trying to get those kids away from your side of town, you laughed. You're a liar—and you're a liar, Judge—when you say Petey White's death was an accident. None of those kids would have hung around down here if you hadn't let them, even encouraged them."

Kurt Fromm surged to his feet like a roaring lion; his chair overturned. "You damn—"

Judge Walther grabbed his arm. "Easy, Kurt. They're listening out there at the bar."

Kurt Fromm flung the fat man's hand off, but checked the violence boiling within him. "Listen, Manning, I know you're touched in the head, but— Hell, everybody knows it was an accident. The kid shouldn't have been down here—"

"Where did he get the old faro layout he was playing with," Manning said evenly, "when you killed him?"

A cold, set stillness, like a mask, slid over the blond giant's face; only his tawny eyes in the mask looked alive. "Shut the door. Let's talk this over." Without moving Kurt Fromm gave the impression of being crouched to spring.

"I'm through talking. You ran this town, south of Front Street," Manning said. "Your tinhorn marshal here saw that the dance hall girls stayed on their side of the line. You could have done the same with the kids. It isn't only Petey's death, Fromm; it's all the children in this town—the way they've been growing up because you wouldn't hold the lid on. Clear out of here by sundown."

Kurt Fromm said softly, "And if I don't?"

"I'll be looking for you."

The big man laughed. "You won't have a bit of trouble finding me," he said, "because I'll be right out in front looking for *you*."

MANNING lay on his bunk, trying to relax, trying not to think. A fly buzzed about his face; he did not notice it. He stared fixedly, through the open doorway of the schoolhouse, at the lengthening shadows outside that told him sunset was only about thirty minutes off. He was insulated in the stark, utter loneliness of a man about to go into mortal combat, and thoroughly afraid to die.

When Rita Allison appeared in the doorway he stared at her without surprise; his face mirrored no feeling at all. He did not even make a pretense of sitting up.

"Eric, I heard— It's all over town." She stood over him, looking down, and fright suddenly crumpled her mouth. "W-why didn't you tell me—about Johnny?"

He did not answer. He was watching the shadows slowly creeping in the doorway.

"Eric, why must you? We could go some place else."

He didn't get it, for a moment. Then he sat erect. "*We?*"

Rita tried to smile. "I'm tired of pretending, Eric. Now there's no time left."

Manning said, "I must finish this first—"

"Your precious pride!"

"It isn't pride." Watching the slipping shadows again, he said absently, "Did I ever tell you I couldn't read or write until I was fifteen? An old riverman in Ohio taught me the alphabet, all the schooling I ever had. I learned the rest myself. It wasn't easy. People even laughed at me. I had to work for a living.

"Last year in school here I had kids eighteen years old who couldn't write their names. What chance would they have to make anything of themselves, if I let Kurt Fromm run me out of here?"

"But, Eric, what chance have you—"

"You'd better go, Rita."

Alone, with deliberate slowness he began to clean and oil his gun. Rummaging in the portmanteau for cartridges, his fingers closed on a hard, familiar object, wrapped in cloth—the hilt of his cavalry saber. He drew the blade from its scabbard, tested its razor-edge with a thumb.

His mind slid back; the war seemed dim and far away, yet now certain pictures stood out sharply like remembered snatches of a nightmare. Manning felt the old violence quickening his blood. He stood up suddenly and made a slow figure-8 pass in the air, and then a lightning-swift one that made the blade sing wickedly, a barbaric war song of blood and slaughter. . . .

The sun was fading in the west when Eric Manning started for Front Street. He strode leisurely through side streets and alleys to avoid meeting anyone. He felt strangely calm now. In his right hand he carried the gleaming saber; his gun was slanted into the waistband of his pants for a left-hand draw. He thought with grim amusement of how much he must look like one of his wild Gaelic or Norse forefathers, carrying his long blade into combat.

IN THE mouth of an alley at the west end of Front Street he halted, abnormally aware of the evening's quiet. A tomblike silence pervaded Front Street. He peered around the corner of the stable beside which he stood.

Down the entire length of Front Street empty hitchrails reared up like skeletons in the falling twilight. The street looked weirdly deserted. Then he noticed shadowy lines of men standing under the wooden awnings of shops and saloons as if awaiting a parade. They stood like wax images, hardly moving, watching toward him up the street, gathered like vultures to see him killed.

Among the crowd, he knew, were men waiting for a glimpse of him to signal Kurt Fromm.

He walked back up the alley two blocks north to King Street, then east four blocks in the thickening twilight until he knew he was directly north of Dutch Henry's Saloon. He turned south then, stealthily approaching Front Street through dusky backyards and shadowy gangways.

In the darkened narrow slit of space between Stoeger's butcher shop and Butler's general store he crouched down behind an empty apple barrel, hardly ten yards from the sidewalk on Front Street. He heard the restless shuffle of men's feet; he had a clear view of Dutch Henry's, the Buckhorn, and the Golden Spur across the wide dusty street. He heard a man mutter, "I don't see Fromm neither," and another reply, "He's in Henry's. He figger'd the teacher'd look for him in the Spur, so— There he comes now!"

Manning saw Kurt Fromm step from Dutch Henry's out onto the sidewalk. A soft venting of pent-up emotion rippled through the crowd. With the fluid grace of the alert fighting animal the giant in the beaded buckskin shirt stepped down between hitchrails and strolled slowly out in the middle of the street.

Even from a distance through the gray-blue dusk Eric Manning could sense the danger in this man, the superb self-confidence that let him offer himself as a target alone out there in the street. He thought, *I could kill him now, right here,* but did not touch his gun. There were kids scattered through that crowd—there were always kids. They must see Kurt Fromm as he truly was.

Kurt Fromm, aware that he was the center of all eyes, ignored the rabble. He wheeled and began to walk slowly west up the middle of Front Street, cat-eyed, poised on the balls of his feet. His glance swinging in ceaseless arcs from side to side, the big white-handled guns riding on his trim hips.

With one hand Eric Manning pulled off his Congress boots. He stood erect in the gangway. His breathing was quick,

deep; he felt no fear, no anger, nothing. Only one thought filled his mind: *Get close fast.*

A man called, "He lost his nerve, Kurt."

Kurt Fromm laughed. The show was all his. "That schoolmarm never had any nerve."

ERIC MANNING, saber in hand, shot out of the gangway, cleared the elevated sidewalk at a bound. Then he was sprinting diagonally across the street, shadow-silent in the powdery dust, toward Kurt Fromm's tapering back, not twenty yards away. So abrupt, unexpected, was his appearance that he had covered most of the distance before any spectator recognized him; before most, their attention concentrated on the big man, even saw him.

Manning said almost in Kurt Fromm's ear, "Who has no nerve?"

The blond giant started his draw as he whirled, but glimpse of a naked steel blade almost in his face shattered his poise, jammed his smooth reflexes. He fumbled one gun, fired the other still in its holster, the bullet tearing into the dust.

The saber hummed with the force of Manning's downward swing. The blade bit through buckskin, muscles, bones, and burst free in one sweeping stroke. Kurt Fromm's right hand with half of his forearm plopped softly into the thick dust. Blood spurted from his severed sleeve.

Kurt Fromm screamed in hysterical terror, turning to run as Manning whipped the sword up for the final stroke. Then the blond giant perked sidewise as if lifted off the ground by the crack of a heavy rifle. He was dead before he hit the ground, a gaping hole in his ribs, the look of terror still on his face.

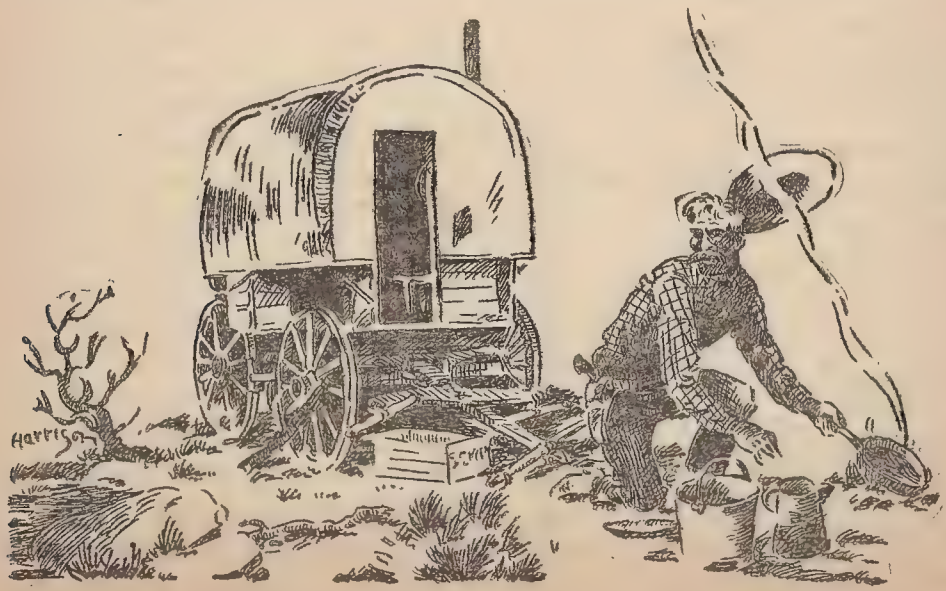
From the sidewalk before the hardware store an old man came shambling out into the street—Pop White. He was carrying a smoking Sharps buffalo gun. He stopped beside Eric Manning and stared down at the battered body in the dust. Silently he reached into a pocket of his tattered vest, and flung five gold coins into Kurt Fromm's staring face. Then he turned, dragging the butt of his rifle in the dust, and shambled west up Front Street toward the OK Corrals.

Men surrounded Eric Manning, pounding him on the back. George Ball said, "A few of our officials just left town in a hurry, Eric. We need a new marshal, I reckon. How'd you like the job?"

"I'm a schoolteacher—" Eric Manning began.

"He'd make a fine marshal," a soft voice said behind him. Turning, he looked at Rita Allison, with Johnny. "He has a way with thugs, and youngsters."

"Well, if you think so," Eric Manning said, "I guess I'd like it fine."



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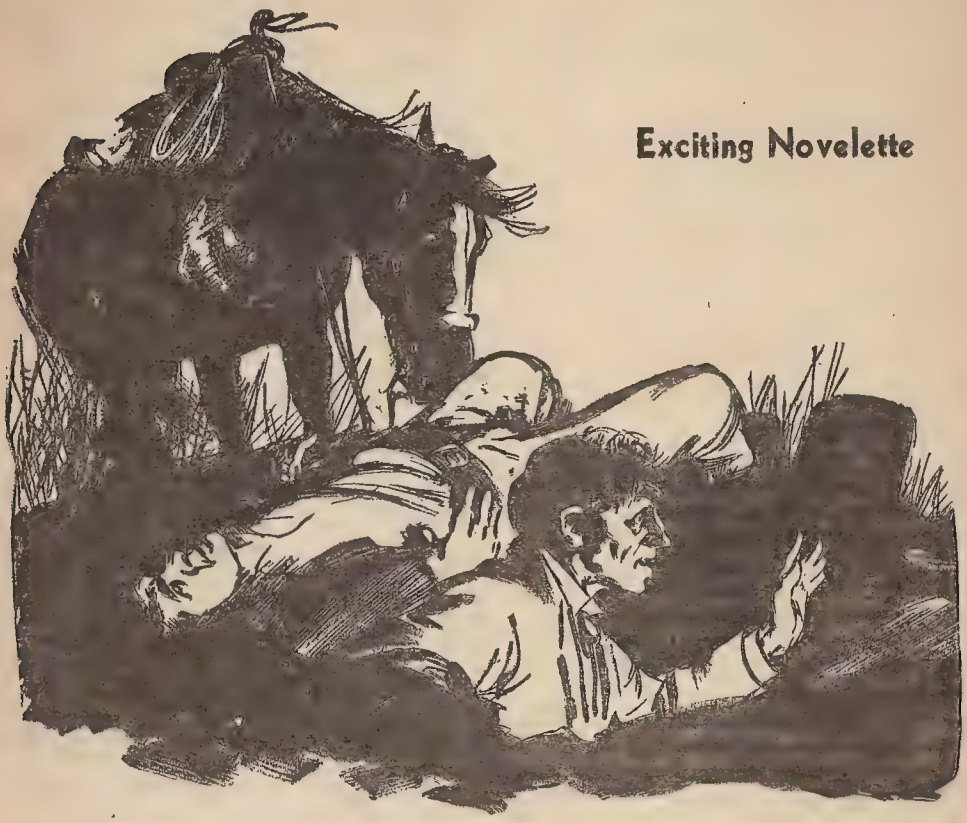


Exciting Novelette

CHAPTER I

THE plate-glass window of the Wounded Eagle Ranchers' Bank reflected the figures of two men, one motionless, the other moving. The motionless figure was tall, lithe, its perfectly balanced pose suggesting panther-like speed and strength. The moving figure was long-jointed, angular, saddle-bowed and stirrup-halted. It was crossing the wide, dust-swaddled street at the still figure's back, stepping slowly, as with heavy purpose. As it drew near, Glint Smith stopped watching it and turned his gaze upon his own motionless reflection.

He hadn't changed much in the four years he'd been away from Wounded Eagle. A mite leaner, perhaps; a bit more bent through the shoulders. The leanness was good. A man didn't worry much about *forty-fotched-fat,* if at thirty he still counted four spans around the waistline.

The silvery bullet groove in the tan-bark-hued skin of his right cheek caught enough of the midday sun to glint brightly in the shaded glass. The scar was spade-shaped, as large as a dime, and the draw of its pucker lifted the corner of his thin lips in what might pass as a quizzical half-smile. Glancing at it, he recalled that it had been written in his flesh on just such an autumn noonday as this, almost in that very spot, and by the dead brother of the big, slow-moving man at his back.

The platinum scar had earned him his name—Glint. It was a name that was rapidly becoming a byword up and down the Smokestack River range. He was proud of the name, proud of his reputation as a hunter of wild mustangs, proud

Boot Hill

By

Glenn Low

Although Glint Smith had had plenty experience as a wild-horse hunter, this was the first time he tried saddle sleuthing in a man-hunt chase. And only when he reached boot hill could he figure out a murder mystery.

of the things men said of his speed and courage.

"Mighty sorry we couldn't hold your mother's funeral over 'til you got here, Glint," purred the big man as he paused at the famous horse tamer's shoulder. "If we'd knowed what part of the high mesa you and your outfit was trailin', we could have got word to you in time. Bendle, the undertaker, held the body five days, and—"

"Never mind, sheriff," said Glint, his tone rough. "You did the best you could."

Sheriff Mont Gorson stared at the reflections in the bank window a moment; then, awkwardly, without looking at

Glint, said, "You up to the grave?"

"Yes." Glint nodded. "You folks picked a nice spot. Thanks."

AFTER another pause Gorson said: "We didn't think it necessary to hold your stepfather's body for long. He was shot up bad. Two .45-90 slugs tore through his middle. Both of 'em hit the spine and splattered. Didn't leave him much you could call a back. Bendle laid him out last evenin'. We buried him this mornin'."

"It was just as well," replied Glint. "I realize you boys couldn't know when I'd be found, when I'd get here."

The sheriff fumbled in a vest pocket, brought out a ring of keys. A deputy, carrying a rifle, walked around the corner of the bank, spoke to them, turned back.

"Keys to the bank," said Gorson, dropping them into Glint's hand. "I found them in Minnick's coat."

The mustang hunter jiggled the keys in his fist, was looking at Gorson's reflection as he said, "Tell me about the killin', sheriff."

"Nothin' much to tell." Gorson pulled a black twist of tobacco from his shirt pocket, gnawed off a sizable chew. "He locked the bank at noon, aimin' to go down to Teazy's for a bite to eat, I reckon. Mitch Bruce came out of the bank ahead of him. The guns cracked from over near the hotel corral. The first slug spun him clean around, the second kept him spinnin'. He fell at Mitch Bruce's feet, deader'n a p'isoned buzzard."

"Didn't see anything of the hombre that shot him?"

The sheriff shook his grizzled head. "No. The two shots came mighty nigh on top of each other. Might be they came from different guns." Gorson took time to spit. "First thing afterwards, I put a guard around the bank. Nobody's been inside since Minnick locked it. You see, I thought the shootin' might be the commencin' of a holdup. When we went over and scoured around the corral we didn't find anythin'."

"Anybody have it in for Minnick?" Glint stepped over to the bank door, began trying the keys.

"Mitch Bruce didn't kindle any love for him," said Gorson. "But Mitch was alongside of him when he was shot, so that lets him out."

Glint found the right key, twisted it, pushed the big door inward. "What's Mitch doin' now? Heard his dad sold out the 2-JB brand."

"That's c'rect," said the sheriff. "Old John sold out his spread a year ago, right after his wife died. The three of them, old John, Mitch and the girl, Trela, are livin' here at Wounded Eagle. John ain't doin' anythin'. Mitch has been buyin' and swappin' broncs. His sister's been keepin' house for them."

Glint entered the bank, motioned Gorson inside and closed the door. "I wrote Benny Toles a letter this mornin'," he said. "It ought to reach him at Stooger by tomorrow's stage. I asked him to come back and take up his work here at the bank. Minnick had no right to fire him after Mother died. Toles is an honest man."

"Bank ought to be open for business again by day after tomorrow," said Gorson. "Some ranch payrolls to meet then, and the boys get mean if they have to wait for their money."

"I'll not open it until Toles gets here," replied Glint. "Nobody in town that knows anythin' about bankin' that I'd trust with the job."

GLINT'S father, Buck Smith, had founded the bank ten years ago. Four years ago when he'd died, control of the bank's stock and ownership of the building had passed into the hands of his widow. Mrs. Smith had engaged Benjamin Toles, a bank clerk from the county seat at Stooger, to manage it. At her death Jay Minnick, her second husband, owner of the Wounded Eagle Hotel, had taken charge, pending Glint's arrival, and Toles had been fired.

"Good move, your sendin' for Toles to come back," Gorson said as Glint unlocked the barred door to the vault room. "The cowmen hereabouts trust Toles. Bendle, Doc Peers, and old John Bruce won't be able to complain at what you've done."

Gorson had named the important stockholders in the bank. Jay Minnick had been only a small depositor.

"I'm no banker," replied the mustang hunter. "I grew up during the days when my father ran a spread, as you know. As soon as possible I want to get rid of my

share in this money cabin, and move back up the river to join my outfit." Glint walked toward the vault as he spoke. Suddenly he stopped. The sheriff looked across his shoulder. His teeth clicked significantly. The vault door stood ajar. He spoke as Glint strode forward.

"Ain't been anybody broke in. I've had guards all around the place, right from the minute your stepfather was shot, and—" His voice whistled away as Glint pulled open the steel-lined door. His eyes bulged, his long, loose mouth slipped open. He was gazing inside the vault at a corpse, and his face reflected cold astonishment.

Glint squatted on his boot heels beside the dead man, was there a moment, then straightened up. "It's Benny Toles," he said grittily. "His skull's been crushed." He examined the edge of the vault door, then the steel frame. "Door slammed on his head—there's blood and hair here." He touched the metal strip facing the frame. "Wonder when he got to town?"

"Before Minnick was killed," said Gorson. "Nobody's been inside the bank since."

"Then Minnick killed him," said Glint. "He hated him enough. Wonder how he got in town without bein' seen?"

"He was seen," said a wheezy voice from the front door. "I saw him and Minnick ridin' the river trail from Stooger night before last. There was a good moon."

Glint eyed the squat figure in the door a moment, a disgusted frown flicking his face. The scar jumped oddly, danced slowly. "I thought I sent you to Stooger for lariat twine and bullets?" he said.

The short man grinned ashamedly. "Had to stop over here on my way back. Heard about your trouble. Thought I might run into you here. Minnick met Toles ten miles out on the river trail night before last. I saw them as I rode the down trail toward Stooger."

"That," said Sheriff Gorson, his voice hot ice, "is all haywire and burnt leather. Minnick didn't leave town night before last. We buried his wife the day before, and he fired Toles the same day. He was at his hotel all night. Didn't even go to bed."

The squat man let a mild smile spread on his round, elfish face.

"When did Toles leave Wounded Eagle?" asked Glint.

"Day before yesterday," answered the sheriff.

The squat man moved forward hesitantly, closing the door behind him. Glint glanced at him, said, "Come over here, Nick. You was a United States marshal once, might be you can give a good guess as to how long Toles has been dead."

NICK POPPET continued to smile, glanced at Gorson, and came toward them, rolling in a pitching gait that would have marked him as a sailor in any port town. Yet he had never seen the color of salt water in his forty-one years of life.

He was almost as broad as he was long, lengthy of arm, wide of eye. It was said of him that he was the fastest, surest hand with a gun of any man in the Smokestack River country, maybe in the entire state. But Glint Smith knew better. He knew of two men he believed could outdraw and outshoot Poppet. And one of them was Sheriff Mont Gorson.

Gorson was master of the cross-draw. He wore his long-barreled .44 Colt low, swung on the inside of his right thigh, holster boot rawhide tied just above his right knee, which allowed the gun's butt to tilt sideward at a level with his left hip.

Glint knew Gorson's method to be deadly. The sheriff's kind of draw permitted its master to begin shooting the second his iron cleared leather. It also afforded its manipulator the benefit of a sidewise stance, presenting his opponent with a smaller, more difficult target. The only disadvantage in the method was the extra time required for its user to throw his hand across his body.

Glint worked the conventional method, a straight draw, a wrist-rocking attack, and wore his .38 high on his right hip. Often while practicing his gunwork, while trailing wild horses in the high country at the head of Smokestack River, he'd recalled Gorson's lighting manipulation and deadly accuracy, and wondered if his own efforts came anywhere near matching them.

Poppet leaned above the dead man, pushed back an eyelid, pried his mouth open, glanced at his tongue. "How long

you think he's been dead?" inquired Glint.

Poppet cleared his throat, glanced uneasily at the sheriff. "Since mornin' maybe. No longer."

Gorson spoke, anger slicing his words. "That can't be. I've been guardin' the bank, and—"

"Don't get touchy, sheriff," Glint cut in. "Toles might have come here with Minnick yesterday, then stayed inside. His death could have been an accident. It looks like he started into the vault, slipped, or tripped, and struck the edge of the door with his shoulder. His head was in the way, and his weight was enough to send the door against it, crash his skull."

Gorson nodded understandingly, some of the anger fading from his eyes. He didn't see Poppet make a face; but Glint did, and he knew Poppet didn't believe Toles had died in such a manner.

"Minnick must have sent for Toles when your mother died," said the sheriff. "Might be he meant to do the right thing after all."

"Maybe so," replied the horse tamer, glancing through the window at a crowd gathering outside the bank. He saw Mitch Bruce's huge, burly form weaving through a knot of cowpunchers. "We'd better leave Toles's body where it is for the time bein'," he said, looking back, locking determined eyes with the sheriff's puzzled ones. "Seems the most important thing now is to try to find the money that belongs in this vault. The place is cleaner than a winter wasp's nest."

Gorson's eyes popped in surprise. He grunted an oath as he stepped over the corpse, peered into the vault. Poppet walked slowly toward the front, the worn leather of his gun sheaths smacking his thick thighs. Mitch Bruce surged across the sidewalk, pounded the window glass with a mammoth fist.

"Listen to me, Glint Smith!" he shouted. "My father owns mighty nigh as much stock in this here bank as you do. I've got a check I want cashed. Your no-good stepfather refused to cash it yesterday, and now I aim to have it cashed. You hear me? I'm givin' you ten minutes, then I'm blastin' the hell-and-gone out'n this glass winder, and I'm comin' in."

Glint walked up to the glass, squatted on his boot heels, gazed calmly through at the half-drunk, swaggering horse trader. He'd never got along with Mitch Bruce, though he respected and liked his father and sister. Mitch, folks said, was the black sheep of the Bruce family, an old and highly respected one in the Smokestack River country.

"THE bank's closed, Mitch, until we can hire ourselves a teller," Glint said, making his voice friendly. "I'm no banker, neither are you, neither is anybody here in Wounded Eagle. We can't take chances with the people's money by turnin' an inexperienced or dishonest hand loose amongst these books. You ought to understand that much."

Mitch laughed derisively, waved a piece of paper at Glint. "Folks are tellin' the bank's been robbed, that they ain't any money in there!" he bellowed. "Show us a stack of greenbacks from the vault, Glint. Just show us one stack, then maybe I'll go away."

Behind Glint, in a tight, nervous voice, the sheriff said, "We might as well tell them about the robbery, about Toles. They've got to know it sooner or later."

"Don't tell 'em a damned thing," advised Poppet.

Glint said, glancing at the flushed, half-frightened and angry faces in front of him, "Tell them and there'll be trouble, maybe a lynchin'. But you're the one to worry, sheriff, because they'll hold you responsible. You had the keys."

"The best thing," said Poppet, speaking through his teeth, "is to let me salt that big hollerin' hombre down. If I go out there and tell him to vamoose, he'll go loco and reach for his bullet-bats. Then I punctuate his last sentence, and boot hill commences pasturin' another black sheep."

"You stay here—you, too, sheriff," said Glint. "I'm goin' out and do a little talkin'." He rose from his boot heels, and just in time.

A bullet smashed the window, slicing between his legs at the spot where his belly had been a moment ago. The crowd turned heads, as one man. Over the street from an upstairs window in the Wounded Eagle Hotel a small whipcracker of smoke lazied away on the toad's-breath breeze.

"It was a .45-90," said Poppet.

A moment later Mitch Bruce pushed

his leering face into the jagged hole in the glass. "Somebody else is objectin' to your high-and-mighty ways, Glint," he said. "And I'm still waitin' to see that stack of greenbacks."

Glint kicked out some more of the window glass as Mitch leapt back, clawing for his gun. A moment later the tamer of wild horses was on the sidewalk, facing the intoxicated complainant. "What you've said is the same as callin' me a liar, Mitch," he said. "So apologize, then vamoose—or get ready for the worst fist-floggin' you ever got in your life."

Mitch jerked off his coat, threw it down. Then Glint charged, slugging with both fists.

Glint knew something of Mitch's tremendous strength and stamina, knew his only hope for victory lay in his superior speed. He'd deliberately chosen to fight the big bronc-agent rather than have it known the bank was without funds. He knew if the loss became known the populace would accuse the sheriff and his deputies of robbing the bank, perhaps organize a mob and lynch some innocent men. If he whipped Mitch, the crowd would disperse, and he'd have time to try to locate the stolen money and find Toles's killer. If Mitch whipped him, the bank would be entered. Then there'd be hell to pay.

Deftly, a mean smile flicking the scar on his cheek crazily, he sidestepped the big man's first onrush. As Mitch pivoted to come again, Glint caught him with a belting right on the chin. Mitch grunted, tucked his chin deeper into his massive chest, came on. Again Glint sidestepped him, whipping out with a stinging left that connected nicely. Mitch turned swiftly, drove in again.

Something moved at Glint's side. Hands, small and strangely white, clutched his shirt sleeve. A very feminine voice said, "Let my brother alone, you—"

There was a driving jolt—a thunderclap. He remembered hitting the sidewalk, but he didn't remember the three times Mitch Bruce kicked him in the head.

CHAPTER II

ALL right, he was dreaming. Dreaming, simply because this couldn't be real. An angel was ministering to him, bathing his face with a soft, cool cloth. Or—was he dead? The smell of tobacco smoke and the sound of Sheriff Gorson's voice told him he was still very much alive.

"I tell you, men, the bank's been robbed, and Benjamin Toles has been killed—by accident, maybe; but he's dead."

Everything came back to Glint then. A girl had drawn his attention off Mitch Bruce during a fight, and Mitch had slugged him, and— A girl? He remembered—a girl that had called Mitch Bruce her brother. That made her Trela Bruce. He hadn't seen Trela for four years. Why, she'd grown up, changed, and all for the better.

He opened his eyes again. The face he'd accredited to an angel slowly took firmer lines, came clearer, closer. "You're Trela?" he said.

Gorson heard him. Boots began clumping the floor. "I'm Trela," said the girl softly. "I'm sorry I—you see, Glint, I didn't recognize you. I didn't know who was fighting Mitchell."

Gorson's gaunt form loomed beyond the foot of the bed. "Listen, Glint," he said, his voice a worried rasp, "you got to go over to the bank and call off that runted friend of yours. He's over there, sittin' in the teller's booth, takin' potshots at anythin' and everythin' that moves outside. He's goin' to kill somebody, and then I'll hold you both for murder. You hear me?"

Glint heard him and gave a soft smile, glad to learn that Nick Poppet had kept Mitch Bruce and his herd out of the bank. Poppet was a good hand, strictly dependable.

Doc Peers, Bendle, the undertaker, and John Bruce, all stockholders in the bank, moved up beside the sheriff. Peers spoke, his plum-shaped mouth pursing before each word. "Minnick probably robbed the bank and hid the money out before he was killed. We've talked it over, and that's what we've decided happened."

Bendle, tall and fat, his face moonish and set with small, slitted eyes, took up when Doc quit. "We've decided further to tell the people about the robbery. The fact that Minnick refused to cash Mitchell Bruce's check yesterday proves he robbed the bank. He always cashed Mitchell's checks before."

When Bendle finished, Glint looked at John Bruce. The old cattleman, honest,

honorable, clean-eyed, returned Glint's stare, said nothing. "How about you, Mr. Bruce? What do you think happened at the bank?"

John Bruce shook his lank, graying head slowly. "I don't know, and when I don't know I do my guessin' to myself. How do you feel?"

"Fair," said Glint. "Fair to middlin', thank you." He sat up, ran fingers through his thick, dark hair. He looked from John Bruce to the sheriff. "I'm not callin' Poppet off, Gorson. And if any of you fellows let it be known the bank's been robbed you'll answer to me." He threw his long legs over the side of the bed, stood up, weaving a bit.

One glance through a window told him he was inside a second-floor room at the front of the Wounded Eagle Hotel. He saw his horse at a hitchrack across the street, saw the front of the bank, its shattered window gaping in the sun. His hat was on the floor at the foot of the bed; he scooped it up, slapped it on his head. His gun was still in its scabbard at his right hip. A look at Trela, a slow grin that tweeked at the spade-shaped scar, a few words:

"Thanks for the help you've been. I'm sorry I had that how-te-do with your brother."

John Bruce spoke at his side. "Mitchell is no good. He's my son, but he's bad —all bad." The old cow drover's voice trembled slightly. "He's just what folks say, a black sheep."

"Still playin' it strictly on the straight string, ain't you, Mr. Bruce?" said Glint admiringly.

"Yes, sir. And I aim to right to the end."

TRELA slipped her arm through that of her father, drew close to him. Glint swung toward the door, turned with his hand on the knob. "Give me 'til sunup in the mornin', then holler that the bank's been robbed all you want to. Holler your damned fool heads empty, if you want to."

The door opened, banged shut. His spurs jangled a crazy, dowdy tune as he went down the stairs.

A few seconds later Glint entered Teazy's Bar, stopped just inside the door, looked around. He'd hoped to find Mitch Bruce there, and was disappointed. Teazy came to him. "How are you, Glint? Glad to see you back home again." He pushed out his hand. Glint took it.

"Where's Mitch Bruce?"

Afterwards Teazy told that the scar on Glint's face turned a bright red when he mentioned Mitch Bruce's name.

"Went out awhile ago. Rode off, down street. He's sinkin' the redeye, Glint, and as wild as a hawg in the redbrush. Stompin' the puncheon, he is, and swearin' by the holler skulls along Ruby Creek that he'll blast you on sight."

Glint went out, over to his horse. Mounted, he turned its head and rode down the street toward his mother's deserted house. When he rode by the bank he called a greeting to Poppet. Poppet's reply was flavored with a chuckle.

"Business is holler-horned and spizzle-sprung, Glint. Things are deader'n a wind-treadin' horse thief. Ain't had a patron in hours."

As Glint rode on Poppet burst into song, his twangy tenor lifting mightily.

Oh-h-h, the sheriff wished the devil would come,
An' take away his only son.
So-o-o, the devil he come, an' away he run,
The sheriff's wife instood of his son
Snap-poo, snap-sneeder, sny-ana-go-sneeder, snap-poo.

Glint was too far away to catch the words of the next verse, but he knew them by heart. Many a lonely night on the trail of the wild mustang he'd listened while Poppet warbled them.

He took her to the gates o' hell,
An' give her a shove an' in she fell.
One li'l imp come snoopin' around,
She jumped on his head an' stomped him down.
'Nother li'l imp peeped over the wall,
Yellin', "Take her out, Pap,
Or she'll kill us all."
Snap-poo, snap-sneeder, sny-ana-go-sneeder, snap-poo.

Glint dismounted in front of his old home, tethered his horse to the front fence, walked swiftly up the wide, flower-bordered path. The door was locked, but he still had the ring of keys the sheriff had taken from Minnick. One of them fit. He pushed open the door, stepped into a darkened hallway, started to close it. A gun thundered in front of him, a bullet sliced past his head. He ducked forward, racing with all his speed. The

gun roared again, something smacked his left arm, left it partially numb. Another moment and he smashed his fist against flesh.

He followed his first smash with another. It connected. A body, large, broad, fell away from him. A gun clattered to the floor. Behind the falling body a door crashed open. Light rushed into the hall.

MITCH BRUCE fell on his back into what Glint remembered as the dining room. He was onto Mitch before the big man could rise, had him by the throat, choking him and banging his head on the floor at the same time. Mitch groaned, gave up all effort to break Glint's hold, began to beg.

"Don't kill me, Glint. I ain't never meant no real harm. I—I—"

His tongue popped out, eyes bulged, an ugly blueness shot over his muscular face. Glint eased his grasp, let Mitch suck breath back into his lungs, sat on his chest waiting, his fingers still sunk in throat meat.

"I—I only wanted to—"

"Stop your damned lyin'," gritted the horse tamer. "I'm aimin' to find out who shot Minnick, and you're the laddie-buck that can tell me."

"No! Honest to John, Glint, I don't—"

Mitch's voice rasped off as the steel-like fingers tore into his neck again. In a few seconds he gasped loudly. "All right, let loose. I'll tell what I know."

Glint eased up, not taking his hands away. "Spit it out, you polecat! You're one black sheep that'll be pasturin' on boot hill if you don't start talkin', and pronto."

"I—I don't know who killed Minnick. I only know he was on the skids. Toles came to me night before last. He was sore because Minnick fired him, and he wanted me to help him rob the bank. He said—he said I could go in to have a check cashed, stick up Minnick, get the money, then make Minnick come out ahead of me. He promised Minnick would never live to put foot on the sidewalk."

"And you did, eh? You robbed the bank, eh?" snapped Glint. "Where have you hidden the money? Hurry! Spill the works or—"

"I didn't rob it!" gasped Mitch, staring up at Glint with wide, bloodshot eyes. "I'm tellin' you the honest truth—I didn't. When I went in to rob it Minnick seemed to know why I was there. He showed me Toles—Toles's dead carcass. He told me he'd got wise to Toles's plan, had lured him to the bank early that mornin' and killed him. Then he made me a proposition." Mitch paused, licked drying lips. Glint got off him, unholstered his gun, stepped back, letting its hollow finger trace Mitch's chest.

Mitch sat up, rubbed his head, his neck, grimaced painfully. "As I was sayin', he made me a proposition. Wanted me to help him—help him rob the bank."

"You're tellin' a damned lie!" said Glint.

Mitch wagged his head. "No! It's the truth, Glint. He said he'd put the money in some saddlebags and pass it out the back window to me just before closin' time. I agreed after he offered me a good chunk of it. We went out then, and after he locked the door—well, somebody killed him. The shots came from over near the hotel corral."

IN THE pause that waited, Glint reasoned that Mitch's story stood a chance of being true. The big fellow knew about Toles's death.

Glint said, "Why did you come here? Did you think Minnick hid the money in the house?"

Mitch nodded. "Minnick robbed the bank, all right."

"You think somebody in cahoots with Toles killed him—somebody that didn't know he'd already killed Toles?"

"I had it figured like that?"

"You didn't find anythin' here?"

Mitch shook his head. "No, but it's here all right. Where else would Minnick hide it?"

"I don't even know that Minnick got it," said Glint. He reached, picked up Mitch's gun, removed the shells, pitched it to Mitch, empty. Mitch caught it, rammed it into his empty holster. "I'm lettin' you go," said the wild-horse wrangler. "If you tell anybody Toles is dead, if you make one bad move, I'm turnin' you over to the sheriff for breakin' into my house, for attemptin' to rob the bank. I'm givin' you a chance because of your dad. He's a square hombre."

Following Mitch to the front door, Glint wondered if Trela didn't have something to do with his lenient actions toward her brother. He wouldn't admit to himself that she didn't have.

He watched Mitch mount his bronc, ride back toward the center of town; then he turned back into the house, closed the door and locked it. He meant to find the bank money if Minnick had hidden it here, and began a systematic search.

Twilight fell, then darkness settled, and the tall man with a bright scar on his cheek continued the search. He was in the cellar, prodding in a litter-filled corner when he found the bloody riding glove. He picked it up, examined it curiously. It was Minnick's glove, he knew; but he couldn't understand why a string had been tied tightly around its cuff and a big knife slit opened in its palm. It was caked inside and out with dried blood.

He put it in his pocket, raked again in the litter. He was almost to the bottom of the old pile of newspapers, mail-order catalogs, discarded bits of cast-off clothing, when he found the dead chicken. Its condition told him it had been dead only a matter of hours. Its head had been partially severed, but not one particle of blood marked its body feathers. He stood looking at it a long time, then kicked some papers over it, turned and walked away.

Deep in thought he pushed open the door at the head of the cellar stairs, stopped, peering above his lantern as a gun joggled his side.

"I didn't go far, Glint," said Mitch Bruce, leering in his face. "Thought I'd give you time to find the money. Now hand it over."

"I didn't find it," said Glint coldly, thinking there was no remedy for a man like Mitchell Bruce—no remedy this side of the grave, at least.

"Get out into the dining room," ordered Mitch. "We'll take a good look. It's my notion you've located the cash, all right."

Glint obeyed, walking stiffly. In the dining room, Mitch told him to hang onto the lantern, and reached to pat his shirt for the money. It was just as the big bronc-swapper leaned forward that a gun crashed outside a window. A thousand slivers of tinkling glass jumped into the room.

Mitch dropped his gun. His arm dangled, blood spurted from a bullet hole just above his biceps. The next instant Glint was slugging hot lead at the paneless window. As he pumped trigger he ran forward. Almost to the window he stopped abruptly, took three backward steps, crumpled onto the floor, blood slipping from under his hatband.

CHAPTER III

SOME fool had coated the earth with bell metal and was pounding on it with a sledge hammer as big as a mountain—no, bigger than that—much bigger than just a mountain.

Glint opened his eyes, and there was no change from the deathly blackness. He realized it was not a metal-covered earth upon which the colossal sledge hammer hailed its blows, and that the sledge hammer was no sledge hammer at all, but a razor-edged adz digging away inside his skull.

He lifted a hand, fingered his head through blood-crusty hair. A deep trench, filled with clotted blood, came under his tender touch. He sighed painfully and closed his eyes again. Memory was a stream of salty water sloshing across the raw cells of his aching brain.

"A leather glove," he moaned. "Tied like a nugget poke? . . . A chicken with its throat cut? . . ."

After a minute's rest he pulled out his watch, removed the crystal, felt the hands. It was a few minutes past midnight. He wondered if Poppet was still holding out at the bank, what had happened to Mitch.

In time he could stand, and when he tried it he bumped his head against the ceiling of his pitchy quarters. The bump sent millions of blazing pain-needles down his spine, made him sick to his stomach. The pain finally eased, and he realized where he was.

An ice rack told him. This was the inside of an ice pit his father had installed in their backyard years ago. In winter they had filled it with ice cut from the river, and the cool earth had kept it from melting for half the summer. Knowing this did not help him, though. It only told him he would be there forever unless outside help materialized.

It surprised him when, a moment later, he discovered he'd been permitted to keep his gun. It was in his holster. He pulled it out, found the shells had been removed, and reloaded it from a supply in his

pocket. Afterwards, he sat down on the ice rack, sunk his head in his hands, tried to ease the jouncing throb inside it by gritting his teeth.

He was there half an hour later when he heard a fumbling sound overhead. As he listened, the next instant told him somebody was fooling with the big iron latch that held the pit lid firmly in place. A few moments later the rusty lid hinges squeaked and a familiar voice from above said:

"It's me. Mitch. You all right, Glint?"

"Sure. Fine. What kind of polecat play you up to now?" Glint's voice was shaky.

"I've made up my mind to play square," replied Mitch Bruce. "Somebody shot out the lantern after you fell. I couldn't see who came in and dragged you out. They never came back for me, though. So later I went home. My dad guessed where I might find you—he did after I told him what had happened. He asked me to come and let you out. He wants to see you, Glint. It's important. He's all shook up.

"Somethin's happened to him. I never saw him like this before. He's like he was when my mother died, only worse. He's in bad shape, Glint. The way he's actin' made me see things different. I've made up my mind to go it straight from here on out."

Glint wanted to believe what he heard, hoped it was true. The fact that Mitch had returned to release him spoke in the big fellow's favor.

In a moment Mitch's voice came again. "I'm reachin' down, feel for my hand. I'll help you out. It's my left hand, so take things easy. My right arm's all busted to hell and gone from that bullet."

GLINT and Mitch rode back to the Bruce home together. They found John Bruce in the kitchen, sitting at a table. The old cattleman's face was pale, drawn. His eyes seemed tired, were glazed and bloodshot. He was certainly changed from the independent, determined person he'd appeared a few hours earlier at the Wounded Eagle Hotel.

He greeted Glint in a shaky voice. He did not speak while Mitch brought a washbasin, poured hot water in it for Glint to bathe his face and head. Afterwards, he asked Glint to sit down at the table.

"I've—I've been a foolish man, Glint," he said. His eyes held straight ahead, rigidly, avoiding the mustang trapper's face. "I've asked you here to hear a confession." His voice, a lifeless monotone, faded away, then came back the same. "I murdered your stepfather—I hid by the hotel corral and shot Jay Minnick."

Glint fought to hold back an exclamation of surprise. If anyone else in Wounded Eagle had spoken those words Glint might have believed him, but not when it was John Bruce. The old cattleman had been his father's best friend. Glint had known and admired him since childhood. It just didn't stack up with the old man's character. John Bruce was not a man to do murder from ambush. If he'd had a crow to pick with Minnick he'd have done it out in the open.

Mitch came forward, his mouth hanging open in amazement. He didn't make a sound, just stood, tense with surprise, staring at his father.

"It'll be hard for you to believe, Glint," mumbled the old cowman, "but you'll have to believe it. Minnick offered me a share in the bank money if I'd help him rob the bank. I agreed—partly because I owe a debt—because I owe Doc Peers money, and partly because of greed. Day before yesterday, noon, I went around back of the bank, like Minnick had planned, and waited until he passed out the money.

"I brought it here in a brace of saddlebags. After Minnick closed up, he came here and—" The old man's voice became so shaky he was forced to pause. Tears rode the reddened rims of his eyes.

Glint turned on Mitch, said, his voice low, menacing, "He's lyin' to cover up for you. You helped Minnick instead of him. You know who shot him, so spit it out! Was it Toles? You maybe killed Toles afterwards, sneaked his body inside the bank somehow. Maybe one of Gorson's deputies is in on this with you?"

Mitch wagged his head. "I didn't—I didn't do any of that. Minnick made me a proposition, like I said, but I didn't get the chance to take him up. Toles made me an offer, too, but—"

John Bruce's voice cut in. "Mitchell is a no-good black sheep—can't be trusted. But no worse—no worse than his father. He didn't go in cahoots with Minnick. I'm tellin' the truth." A hard sigh caused him to shudder. "Now take me

in and turn me over to the sheriff," he finished.

"Why didn't you go to the sheriff in the first place?" Glint said.

"Because — because you control the bank's stock. I thought—" His chin jerked. Suddenly he let his head fall on his arms. "Minnick came here, offered me a measly ten thousand dollars for my share. We quarreled. So yesterday I killed him. I thought I knowed where he'd hidden the rest of the money, but I was mistaken. I didn't find the rest of it." He reached inside his shirt, pulled out a sheaf of crisp bank notes, put them on the table. "There's the ten thousand," he said. "Now take me to the sheriff. The money proves me out."

Glint glanced at the money, his face unchangingly, he said, "Where's Trela? I'd like to hear what she has to say about this."

"Trela?" The old man raised his head, stared at Glint nervously. "Why—why—Trela's—she's—"

"Well, where is she?" repeated Glint stubbornly. "It's strange she ain't here. Does she know about this?"

Mitch said, "Dad, where is she? She's in bed, ain't she?"

"Yes," said the old man quickly. "Yes, that's where she is. In bed."

"Go see," Glint told Mitch.

MITCH moved toward a door. John Bruce spoke roughly, his tone meaningful. "Let your sister sleep, Mitchell. You hear!"

Mitch hesitated. Glint said, "Go see if she's in her room. If she's asleep you don't need to awaken her."

Before Mitch could move, his father said, "Stay where you are. I don't want Trela brought into this."

"Then I'll go," said Glint, standing up.

A gun leaped into John Bruce's fist. His voice was shaky, but determined. "I'd hate like snakes to have to shoot you down, Glint. But nobody's goin' to bother Trela. You understand?"

Glint glanced at the gun, his eyes slitted, the scar on his cheek glinting scarlet. "You'll sure have to shoot me down then, Mr. Bruce," he said, whirling away. His spurs chinked musically as he strode the room. John Bruce didn't shoot. In a few minutes Glint returned.

"She ain't in her room, Mitch," he said, not looking at the old man's sad, beaten face, the gun dangling in his fingers. "She's not in the house, either. So we got to find her—you hear?" His words whistled through teeth that were clenching in viselike determination. "We've got to find her!"

"Where do we start lookin'?" replied Mitch.

Glint turned to John Bruce. "You know where she is, all right, Mr. Bruce," he accused. "Somethin's got you scared. About the only thing that could scare you would be somethin' pretty awful that might happen to Trela. You wouldn't be scared like this for yourself, or for Mitch; but you're ready to own a murder you didn't commit to save Trela from somethin'. What is it—who is it? Tell me who threatens her harm. Tell me and I'll smash every damn bone in his carcass! I'll rip this town so wide open that it—"

"I've told you the truth," moaned the old cattleman. "If she ain't in the house, I don't know—I don't know. . . ."

Glint sighed angrily, said, "Come along, Mitch." They went out. Riding toward the bank, Glint said, "I'm goin' to trust you to take Poppet's place at the bank, keep anybody from comin' in. This business needs a brain like Poppet's. I'm sure hopin' he can help me with a puzzle—a puzzle that might make murder savvy if we can show a stabbed ridin' glove and a chicken with its throat cut means there's more in Minnick's grave on boot hill than just his corpse."

No sign of life registered in front of the bank as they rode down Main Street. Except for a light in the hotel and the lights still burning at Teazy's Bar, the town was dark, also a little too quiet. From somewhere beyond Teazy's a drunken waddy sang a sad song, softly and sadly. Glint slowed down as they reached the bank. Mitch halted his mount. Glint whistled softly, then waited. There was no answer. He tried it again without response from Poppet.

"Somethin's gone wrong," he told Mitch. "Hold my bronc. I'll walk over and see what—"

He walked swiftly, as silently as possible, trailing his spurs. Beside the broken window he stopped, listened. "Poppet? Nick?" he called softly. His reply was sudden, loud, and trimmed with red and blue fire. He heard a bullet kiss

air past his head, and leapt toward the bank door.

As he burst into the bank he heard boots clumping the floor of the vault room, racing toward the rear. He ran toward the sound, stumbled over something soft, fell on hands and knees. A back window banged up, then banged down. Whoever had been there had got away.

Standing back from the object that had tripped him, he flicked a match, aiming it at the floor between him and it. With luck the match head would strike the floor and light. The first one failed, as did the second, the third. The fourth one hit properly, ignited. Its glow showed him Nick Poppet's face, drawn and motionless.

As no gun-blast had welcomed the match's flame he guessed he was in no immediate danger, and crossed over to Poppet's sprawled body. The match fizzled out. He knelt, struck another. A whisky bottle half full of something that looked like coffee stood on the floor near the body.

"Damn them!" he said hoarsely. "If they've killed Nick I'll—"

He called to Mitch, struck another match, leaned closer for a better look at his friend.

CHAPTER IV

GLINT found John Bruce at the kitchen table just as they'd left him. He glanced up at Glint expectantly, cleared his throat. The sheaf of bank notes was still on the table.

"I want you to find me a long-handled shovel," Glint said. "And a lantern—I'll need a lantern."

Without a word the old man arose, went out on the back porch. Glint followed, took the lantern when Bruce lifted it down from a nail.

"I'll get the shovel—wait." He left the porch, disappeared in the darkness. In a minute he was back, carrying the shovel. "What you up to?" he asked.

"You might make things easier if you'd tell all you know," Glint replied coldly.

"Where's my boy?"

"At the bank," Glint told him.

John Bruce bowed his head. "Don't trust Mitchell, Glint," he said. "He's bad—bad all the way through. Bad."

Glint walked around the house, mounted his bronc. He turned its head toward the little hill, rising in bleak darkness behind the town—the little hill where his mother and father would rest forever.

At the cemetery fence he dismounted and tethered his horse. Inside, amongst the gravestones, he knelt and lit the lantern. A few minutes later he found Jay Minnick's grave.

As he started digging in the freshly turned earth, he murmured: "A leather glove, blood-caked, tied like a nugget poke. A chicken with its thoat cut. There can be only one answer."

He worked fast, piling the dirt neatly. Finally the shovel raked the rough-box, and he paused to wipe sweat from his face. A clod slipped into the grave, struck his boot. He glanced up, saw Mitch Bruce's face leering down at him.

"Howdy, Glint," Mitch breathed. A gun gleamed dully in his hand. "Hurry. Open it. I figure now you've found the balance of the bank money for sure."

"I reckon," said Glint, clenching his teeth, "that a black sheep is always that—black all its life, all the way through."

He soon had the dirt cleaned off the rough-box lid. Mitch moved closer above as he began prying a board with the shovel. The board sprung suddenly. Light from the lantern shafted the break. The rough-box seemed empty.

"No coffin!" said Mitch, his words almost a gasp.

"No corpse," said Glint, pulling the board away. He reached back, got the lantern. The money was there, stacked neatly.

"Hand it up—no tricks," whispered Mitch.

Glint knew to disobey meant death. As he stooped over, Mitch reached down and quickly snaked away his gun. He lifted the money out, stack by stack, passed it up.

"Now—" said Mitch, his whisper strident. "Get down inside the box, Glint. Pronto!"

"What you aim to do?"

Mitch's leer broadened. "Get down inside the box, Glint," he repeated. "You want me to blast your brains out?"

Glint obeyed. Mitch leapt into the grave, dropped Glint's gun inside the rough-box. "It's unloaded," he said. "Thought maybe it'd come in handy

when the air gets bad." He stomped the board back into place. Dirt was falling on the lid before Glint could reload his gun.

Sounds of the falling clods became softer and softer. Finally they ceased altogether. For the first time in his life Glint Smith knew the true meaning of fear.

AN HOUR, perhaps a bit longer, then he would die. The earth weighting the box lid was moist, heavy. The agony of his dread was so great that he considered placing his gun to his head, blasting himself into a darkness less depressing than the smothery blackness that closed him in.

He placed his hands on the lid, gave a mighty surge. Nothing moved. At the back of his mind thoughts roved, conjectures as to what had happened to his stepfather, who he believed was alive. The blood-caked glove, the chicken with its throat cut, had told him much, had enabled him to guess that Minnick had used the chicken to obtain blood with which to fill the glove, then had placed the glove of blood inside his shirt.

Those shots at the hotel corral probably had been set off in the air. Minnick had been expecting them, had fallen when they sounded, at the same time using his pocketknife to puncture the glove inside his shirt. The gushing blood had fooled Mitch Bruce, the only eyewitness. Afterwards Doc Peers and Bendle, the undertaker, had attended to Minnick, and the town had believed him dead and buried.

He recalled what Sheriff Gorson had said about Minnick's back being shot away. It might be the sheriff was repeating what Bendle and Doc Peers had told him. The sheriff might be innocent of implication in Toles's murder and the bank robbery, then again he might be in it over his head. He decided Bendle and Peers had originated the scheme to rob the bank. Minnick had been their tool, no doubt. Toles's part was hard to figure, but it was a good bet he'd been there to stand for his dead employer's rights.

The glove and dead chicken had set Glint on the right trail—if he'd only not trusted Mitch.

Glint placed knees and hands against the lid, bowed his back, slowly applied pressure. Nothing moved, except his muscles, and he decided his only chance lay in digging himself out. His pocketknife was small, flimsy. Careful not the break the blade, he began hacking at the lid, centering his efforts as well as he could. He supposed he would smother in his attempt, but the work eased his nerves.

Finally, when his wrists ached unbearably from the strain, he paused to rest. It was then he heard a muffled sound, as of someone speaking. Shortly afterward his hope went on the increase. Someone was plying a shovel to the dirt above—someone was opening the grave.

Almost, he called out, wishing to assure them of his well being, then clamped his teeth tightly. Up there might be Doc Peers and the undertaker, Bendle. Perhaps his stepfather. . . .

He put away his pocketknife, gripped his gun, waited silently. Before the shovel touched the rough-box, he recognized the voices of the toilers. They were Peers and Bendle.

Bendle had said, "Mitch Bruce was smarter'n we figured. It's a good thing we follered him from the bank."

Peers said, "Wonder where Glint is?"

"At Bruce's house, likely," replied Bendle.

"You think old John will stick to the story we gave him?"

"Yes," said Bendle. "He knows what's happened to his daughter, knows what can still happen to her."

"You think Glint will turn him over to the law?"

"No. I got a good look at his eyes when he spoke to the girl. He's soft on her or I'm a liar."

"But sooner or later," said Peers, "old John will tell him, then—"

Bendle chuckled. "Quit your worryin'. We can make sure one of them ain't around to hear or tell anythin' Move Mitch's body over closer. I'm down to the lid."

GLINT knew now. They'd caught Mitch leaving boot hill with the money, killed him. He wondered why they hadn't seen his horse, guessed that Mitch had loosened it, driven it off. They'd brought Mitch's body back to bury it and cover their crime.

A board squeaked above him. Light shafted in, dim, pale from the lantern.

He placed his knees against the lid, soundlessly. A board moved. He shoved upward, using his every muscle. The lid shot up, hit Bendle, upset him. Glint stood in the rough-box, his gun gleaming menacingly.

Bendle, faster on the think than Peers, clawed at his hip. Glint shot him between the eyes. Peers, pale, trembling, meekly surrendered his gun. The scar jerked oddly in the lantern light as Glint spoke.

"What have you done with Trela Bruce, Peers?"

"She's in my room at the hotel," Peers chattered. "She's unharmed. I—"

Glint didn't believe him. "Where's Minnick?"

"Minnick?" Peers croaked, squinting nervously. "He's—dead."

"You lie!" barked Glint. "Where is he?"

"I—we gave him his share of the loot. He lit out, left the country."

"You lie!" repeated Glint. "If he's gone, where'd you get the money you forced John Bruce to show me? You and Bendle buried your share here."

"I don't know where Minnick is," said Peers, his plum-shaped mouth wobbling with fright. "He's around somewhere—hiding. He's aiming to leave out, though. Maybe already gone."

"How'd you get to Poppet at the bank?"

"He sent to Teazy's for coffee by a kid. I met the kid—put the—put the stuff in the coffee."

Glint was silent a moment, a cold smile flicking his face, disturbing the glittering scar. Finally he said, "Get down in the rough-box, Doc."

Fear shook the little medico, almost downed him. His knees bowed, went limbery. Glint helped him into the grave. He sobbed, begged for mercy as Glint scooped dirt in on top of the rough-box. "You'll have plenty of time to pray, Doc," he called out once. Then he worked grimly, swiftly.

He found the money in Mitch's saddlebags near by, took time to line the two corpses side by side, cover their faces with their coats. Then, with the money, he strode from the cemetery. He found only one horse tethered at the gate, and guessed Bendle and Peers had walked out from town. The horse was Mitch's; Glint mounted it and rode.

A light burned in John Bruce's house. Glint rode close, called to the old cattleman. In a moment Bruce appeared at the door, hesitated, then came down to the gate.

"I've got the balance of the bank money here," Glint told him. "I want to leave it in your care." He handed over the saddlebags.

Bruce took them stiffly. "You—you mean you trust me, Glint?" His voice was thin, catchy.

"Why not? Any decent hombre will lie to save his daughter, especially when—" He quit, decided he would save all comment as to Trela's sweetness and goodness for her own ears.

"Glint," said the old man, his voice steady, resolute, "I'm goin' to tell you what happened. If they kill her—if—"

"You don't need to say a word," Glint stopped him. "I know the play, from the table up. The polecats still hold two aces against me, but I figure I'll whip their hand with sixes. Stand pat, Mr. Bruce." He spur-touched the bronc, sang out as he rode toward the Wounded Eagle Hotel, "It'll be a good day come dawn. The sky's goin' to be clear and sunny."

THERE was no clerk in the deserted lobby. Glint knew the location of Peers's room. He climbed the stairs on tiptoe, damning the occasional murmur of his spurs. Peers's room was at the end of the second-floor hall. He prayed the door wasn't locked; reached, drew a deep breath, flicked the knob. The door swung open. An oil lamp burned on a stand near a bed.

On the bed, pale, motionless, seeming dead, lay Trela Bruce. Beside the bed stood Jay Minnick, his face a mask of stupid fear, his right hand hovering above the butt of the .45 at his hip. Beside him crouched Sheriff Mont Gorson.

Glint stepped forward, stopped, a smile took his face, twisted it evilly. "Four years ago the bad blood of the Gorsons boiled over," he said, his voice level, firm. "The pot that carried that mess was your brother, Mont. Since then the same kind of buzzard p'ison has been stewin' in you. You've kept your grudge, lettin' your nice actions tell damn lies for you. Now you're gettin' a lopsided chance to settle. You lyin', thievin' buzzard!"

Minnick drew a tight breath. It whistled above the quiet of the room.

Gorson was calm, confident. His eyes held Glint's, pointed, magnetlike.

Glint continued easily, "Bendle's dead, Bruce was murdered, Peers is confined. I've got the bank money back, and I know the play as far as John Bruce is concerned. For you two, there's only one way out. You've got to kill me. Understand? You've got to kill me!"

Minnick's breath whistled again. His hand trembled above the .45. The sheriff seemed a statue. Minnick's tongue came out, touched bloodless lips. His nerves weren't going to stand any long wait. The edge of his fear was getting too fine.

Suddenly he dipped his hand. At the same moment Gorson struck. A pivot, his side flashed. The cross-draw. . . .

Glint's hand was a demon's rapier. Gorson's bullet dug splinters at his toes. Glint's .38 spanged a split second before. Gorson's head jerked up, back. His ear shot blood. Glint's second bullet smashed Minnick's chest. The men fell together. Minnick had never a chance to press trigger.

Behind Glint, a wheezy voice said, "Right nice. Mighty nigh as good as I could have done it."

Glint turned. Poppet was there, pale, grinning. "You didn't expect them knockout drops to keep me down forever?" he said. "Somebody spiked my coffee, damn 'em."

They went over to Trela. She was breathing regularly. Her pulse was firm. "Peers gave her a dose of the same stuff he did you," Glint said. "He made John Bruce believe she'd die if he didn't do somethin' to save her."

Glint decided then to let Peers suffer in the grave until Trela revived. "Go along out to Bruce's place, fetch John Bruce over here," he told Poppet. "Tell him to bring the bank money."

"Bank money?" said Poppet, surprised.

Glint nodded. "You'll know all about everythin' soon enough. About Toles, he came back to watch Minnick didn't pull any shenanigans. Minnick killed him. Peers talked. Now get along. It'll help John Bruce to know his daughter's all right."

When Poppet had gone, the tamer of wild horses stood looking down at the sleeping girl. Minutes passed. Once she lifted her hand, let it fall back. A good warmness traced the man's being—a feeling that seemed a living promise.

When she opened her eyes, he was there. She smiled wanly, put her hand in his. He squeezed it—wondered strangely if he might not be able to learn something about banking after all. His father had always wanted him to give the money business a good whirl.

It's said that the female is deadlier than the male. But what bothered this embattled borax miner and his wife was to find something . . .

Deadlier Than the Colt

By M. L. Blair

DOWN in the dip, at the mine, where the sand was thick and loose not a living thing was moving. It was so still you could almost hear the heat haze quiver between the dunes. The sun made the sand between the dunes look like still water. Lena Boatright gave a sigh and turned suddenly to where her husband, Will, had been wheeling borax.

"Maybe he won't come." Her voice was strained and taut.

"Maybe he won't."

Will bent his head to avoid her eyes, then sat down in the sand to clean his gun. He squeezed another drop of oil into the muzzle of the big Colt .44 he held in his right hand. With a short stick he pushed a clean rag through the bore. He twisted the cylinder and dropped the gun into the holster at his belt. His hand moved fast. A fast draw, Lena thought dully. Maybe it was even as fast as Blanchard's.

She watched him as he moved about, tall, angular, never seeming to hurry, yet getting things done smoothly and efficiently. Once she met his eyes, those gentle eyes that yet had something primitive and untamable within them. With a mighty effort she stifled an impulse to take him in her arms, to melt with her love this madness that possessed him. But she did not, because she knew that so doing would demean him. He was a desperate man, desperately resolved to stand by a code of honor and ethics that only men seemed to understand.

It had to do with Blanchard the killer. Three nights ago Blanchard had driven out from Ludlow to the mine in Dry Gulch. Lena had listened, outraged, while he calmly proposed to her husband that they hold up the twenty-two mule team, carrying borax and fifty thousand in gold bullion. Will had refused, and Blanchard had ridden away on his black horse. Then, when he had gone to hold up the team anyhow, he had found its armed guard doubled and unconquerable, and had blamed Will for giving the warning. Now, as a matter of course, he was coming to kill him.

There appeared before Lena a mental image of the soft-stalking, cold-eyed Blanchard. Seeing him, it was easy to believe all that was said about him. He was a vicious, nerveless gunman. Nobody was faster on the draw or shot straighter. That had been proved more than once. With her final dreadful realization of it, the fear that had been building up in Lena found an outlet in words:

"You don't have to see him!"

For a moment Will stood silent. Then, "Why not?"

"You can stay in the mine. He won't stay here long, with a posse on his heels. Come out after he's gone."

He came toward her, slowly, gently, and placed a huge hand on each of her slender shoulders.

"Lena," he said, "if you had been brought up here instead of the South, you would never talk so. I've been in this desert a long time. Its heat and silence clears the mind. It frightened me at first; then I got used to it. Now I love it. No man is going to make me run from it. Now do you understand?"

"No," she said miserably as they stood looking away to the foothills. "Suppose he kills you?"

"Forget about that."

They went inside the mine. Will took his shotgun from its rack and leaned it against a pile of borax sacks. They, she understood, must be ready in case

Blanchard came with confederates and the mine was besieged. If he came alone, Will would meet him alone.

SHE bit her lip, watching her husband scrape the borax from the crystallizing rods. It filled the wheelbarrow. Then he took a stance in the doorway, peering steadily down the slope. She saw the black horse, ridden by Blanchard, coming up the hill slowly toward the mine. He pushed his wide-brimmed hat back so that it sat on his shoulders. His chin and mouth were high into the air. Without looking around Will spoke.

"Keep out of sight," he said. "Find a place to hide."

Lena's throat was stiff and dry as she knelt behind the pile of borax sacks near the mine entrance. Peering from behind them she saw Blanchard coming around a sand dune. He dismounted less than twelve feet from the mine entrance and let the reins of his horse trail in the sand. He was taking long, heavy strides, lifting his legs high with each stride as though wading in deep water. With one bronzed hand hovering near the butt of the gun in his holster, he came closer.

Lena wished there was someone there besides Will and herself. Blanchard's eyes were fierce and bold. His face was streaked with dirt from the heat. He looked as though he hadn't slept for a long time. It was very quiet. Then:

"Hello, Will." His voice was dry and deadly like the fangs of a gila monster.

"Hello, Blanchard."

Their eyes were locked in battle, each probed the other for some sign of faltering or weakness. For a long moment the killer studied Will. He saw no wavering in his face, only relentless determination. A fear crept over him, his hands trembled. Lines of cowardice were etched in his dirty face. Then, strangely and unaccountably, Blanchard's steel-hard voice became a plaintive whine.

"My little plan, Will, the one I talked over with you, sort of miscarried."

"Good thing it did," Will said.

"We could disagree about that."

"Blanchard," Will's voice was eloquent under tension, "if you're here to kill me, go for your gun!"

Blanchard narrowed his eyes against the blaze of the sun.

"Why, I didn't come here to kill you, Will. I just came to say I won't be riding this way anymore. I'm going to Mexico."

"Suppose you start."

There was a strained silence, then Blanchard turned and stumbled through the sand to remount the black horse. His back to the mine entrance, he trotted cautiously down the slope toward the foothills, into the burning heat of the desert. Will watched him go.

When he was out of sight Will laid down his gun in the sand and started to look for Lena. She was standing nearby scraping more borax from the crys allizing rods. Her face was white and her hands trembled. He took her in his arms.

"It's all right," he said softly. "He's gone."

Lena rested her head on his shoulder and the sobs she had held back for so long racked her slim body. His arms tightened about her.

"Don't," he pleaded. "There was never any danger. He was just a windbag who blew up when his bluff was called. That's all you could call him."

He let her go and together they shoveled crystals into the white sacks.

"Borax is as good as gold," he laughed, "and a whole lot safer."

"I don't know about that," she answered. "Why, Will, that sack is full."

He had been shoveling furiously, not noticing the crystals overflowing. He laughed and laughed. But it was a hysterical laugh.

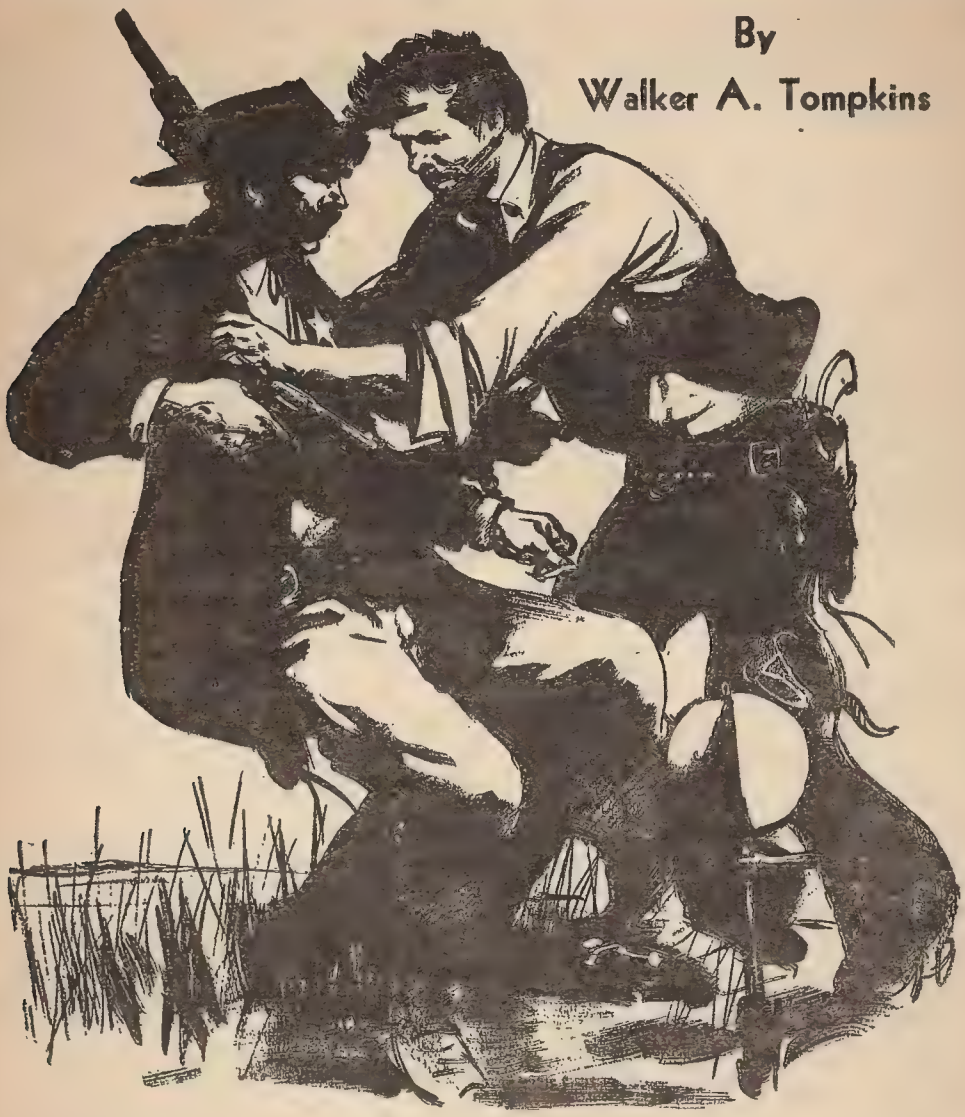
This brave man who had just proved to his wife that he could defend all that was his. This proud man who was willing to die for all that was his. This—even through the near hysteria that possessed them now, Lena was able to decide one thing.

He must never, never know that when Blanchard's voice changed to a plaintive whine, he had discovered her standing on the pile of borax sacks, just back of Will, with the cocked shotgun in her hands, ready with its load of slugs to tear him in two at the first move he made toward his gun.

Border-Hopper's Last Ride

By

Walker A. Tompkins



A lifetime of banditry finally bought Gila Sanchez his handcuff ticket to Yuma. Yet that wily border-hopper was willing to wager his life he'd never arrive—with the bets held by Satan.

JUMPIN' JOSIE, the antiquated wood-burning locomotive which had hauled Number Six on the Eagle-tail-to-Yuma run for thirty-odd years, never stopped at Warbonnet station if she could help it. Warbonnet was a flag-stop midway up a twenty-mile grade. Even though she rarely hauled more than a boxcar and one or two coaches, Josie was taxed to start rolling up a grade from a dead stop. The rusty old six-wheeler, like Seth Kerwick, her engineer, had seen

better days in their tie-riding career.

But this afternoon Kerwick faced a red board at Warbonnet, and there was nothing to do but throttle old Josie to a halt. The engine panted and wheezed in his iron lungs and hissed a protest through cylinder cocks, as if matching the mood of the white-haired old hoghead riding her cab.

"Sorry to flag you down, Seth," apologized the Warbonnet agent, "but you got two passengers for Yuma. Sheriff Rex Clint is taking Gila Sanchez to the pen to serve a life sentence. And Sanchez is braggin' Rex will never get him there alive."

Kerwick and his fireman leaned out to stare at the two men walking down the platform toward the coach. Rex Clint was a prominent figure in this corner of Arizona Territory, a hard, lean man at fifty-one, who had toted a tin star for going on twenty years. Gila Sanchez was something of a celebrity in the cactus country, too. On one occasion he had even held up Number Six and rifled a box of bullion and specie from the baggage car.

"Yeah, old Clint finally did it," the agent went on, eager to justify such an outrage as curbing Jumpin' Josie on a four-degree grade. "Caught Sanchez holding up a Wells-Fargo office in Trigo last week. The jury decided to let Sanchez bust rocks at Yuma for the rest of his misspent life."

Kerwick saw sunlight flash off the handcuffs which linked Clint to his prisoner, as the pair swung up the steps of the coach platform. The conductor gave him the highball signal and Kerwick fed steam to the cylinders.

Jumpin' Josie nearly emptied her sandbox before the big drivers took hold, but there was life in the old girl yet. She left Warbonnet behind, snorting triumphantly through her high funnel stack.

BACK in the jouncing coach, Sheriff Rex Clint selected a window seat and pulled Sanchez down on the seat beside him. The sheriff's gray eyes, cupped in nests of fine wrinkles from a lifetime of squinting against desert sunlight, sized up the other passengers in the coach with more than casual interest.

Besides the conductor, there were only three others in the car: a beefy-jowled drummer in a checkered suit and bowler hat, facing a pair of chap-clad cowboys who were playing blackjack on a board balanced across their knees. They were too absorbed in passing around a whisky bottle to pay any attention to the two passengers who had boarded the train at Warbonnet, a fact which Rex Clint took into account and was thankful for.

Clint sized up the cowhands as harmless enough; they packed six-guns, but such equipment was a standard part of men's garb in this section of the country, complementing their cactus-scuffed batwings and wide-brimmed Stetsons.

Riders frequently boarded Number Six, putting their horses in the boxcar up front, so as to avoid crossing the blistering expanse of Catclaw Desert, a waterless terrain which forced men to ride only by night in the hot season.

Sanchez pulled back the right sleeve of his hickory shirt and stared moodily at the handcuff linking him to the sheriff's left wrist.

"How about unlockin' these bracelets for the trip?" suggested the outlaw. "It's cutting off my circulation."

Clint made his shoulderblades as comfortable as possible against the hard wicker seat.

"Impossible," he grunted. "I only got one key to these irons and I mailed it ahead to the warden at the Territorial Prison, just to be on the safe side. We're double-hitched till we get there, Gila."

Sanchez shrugged, lips curling in a sardonic smile as he watched the sun-parched panorama of the Castle Dome mountains slide jerkily past the grimy windows.

He was a half-breed with skin the color of saddle leather and gray streaks in his thick black hair. He wore *gaucho* pants and jingle-bobbed spurs and a steeple-crowned sombrero, ball-tasseled in the Mexican fashion.

A border-hopper from 'way back, Gila Sanchez had carried a four-figure bounty for as long as old Rex had worn a law badge. But for a man who faced a lifetime behind prison walls, the breed appeared little concerned over his prospects.

"You've waited a long time to dab your loop on me, haven't you, sheriff?" Sanchez remarked conversationally. "*'Sta bueno*—you hold the aces this round. But five gets you fifty that no warden gets the chance to unlock these bracelets."

Rex Clint tugged his battered old John B down over his lean face, his eyes closed in thought. Yes, this trip was the climax

of a generation of keeping the peace in Trigo County. The arrest and conviction of Gila Sanchez was, you might say, the culmination of his career as a lawman.

"You might be loco enough to try a break," answered the sheriff drowsily, "but I hope you don't Corpses spoil mighty fast in this heat, and we got a long trip ahead of us."

The border-hopper shrugged again, pulling thin husks and tobacco sack from his shirt pocket with his free hand.

"That works both ways, sheriff," he pointed out enigmatically. "I wasn't born to rot in a penitentiary, *Señor*. I'll lay you any odds you name I don't get to Yuma."

Clint's mouth hardened under his sandy waterfall mustache. *Sanchez must have an ace up his sleeve*, the sheriff thought. *I've got to keep a stirrup eye open and take no chances.*

Never before in his long career of border outlawry had the law succeeded in corralling Gila Sanchez. He might be a slippery prisoner to hold. Sanchez had plenty of hardcase friends who must have heard of his capture and speedy trial over in Trigo. Clint was surprised that some attempt hadn't been made to rescue the prisoner before now. That was why he was glad the coach on Number Six wasn't crowded with strangers today.

The breed twisted and smoked his quirly, his hooded eyes brooding with secret thoughts of his own. Finally he scrooched up in his corner of the seat and went to sleep. His very self-confidence spelled menace to Rex Clint. No man heading on a one-way trip to a hellhole like the Territorial Prison could be this casual about it, unless he expected a break in his favor.

Clint had a hard time to keep from dozing. The coach was unventilated and hot as a stove. The air was thick with tobacco smoke and cloyed with the mingled fumes of coal oil leaking from the swaying ceiling lamps and the whisky bottle which the hard-playing drummer had uncorked. Bluebottle flies buzzed a sedative lullaby against the panes next to the sheriff's car. His wrist ached where sweat seeped into the crease made by the locked handcuff.

Jumpin' Josie puffed and snorted her way to the watertank stop at Summit View, as eager as a ganted horse sniffing a water hole. This was the last stop between the mountains and Yuma. The sheriff's senses were vitally alert.

This might be a danger spot on the trip. Clint loosened the rubber-stocked Peacemaker in its holster thonged to his leg, cuffing back his Stetson to keep a sharp eye outside.

The blackjack game went on, oblivious of the halt. Up front, Clint saw the station water tender swing the spout of the wooden tank down to fill Jumpin' Josie's thirsty tank for the long haul across Catclaw Desert. A crew of Mexicans were loading cordwood aboard the locomotive tender from the fuel ricked along the siding, working under the supervision of Happyjack Keller, the station agent.

The sheriff watched Happyjack Keller with cynical interest. A few years ago Keller had served a stretch in Clint's jail at Trigo, for buying smuggled goods. Keller had vowed to shoot Clint the next time their trails crossed, and had repeated the brag every time he visited a Trigo saloon and got in his cups.

Clint was alert for anything suspicious, but he saw nothing out of the ordinary during the routine stop. He could hear Keller cussing the Mexican hands, saw him help carry the last few armloads of wood aboard the tender himself, to hurry Jumpin' Josie on her way. Throughout the stop, Gila Sanchez snored uninterruptedly at the sheriff's side.

Clint's nerves settled back to normal when Jumpin' Josie, invigorated by her long drink, pulled the train out of Summit View and started toiling up the long series of horseshoe curves which would snake her over the backbone of the Castle Domes. The sheriff was thankful that there would be no more stops to tempt his prisoner into trying anything rash . . .

TWO hours and fifteen miles out of Summit View, the coach bucked violently as a shattering explosion came from the direction of the locomotive. Number Six writhed like a snake with a crushed spine as trucks left the rails and jounced along over cross-ties for a dozen feet.

Then Rex Clint and his sleeping prisoner were thrown violently forward against the back of the next seat as the coach grated to a stop, canting at a crazy angle diagonally across the tracks.

Maybe this is the moment I've been dreading, Clint thought, his gnarled fist coiling instinctively about his Colt butt. Gila Sanchez swore fluently in Spanish

and lifted a shaking hand to his bloody nose. Up front, the drummer and the two cowpokes were sprawled in the aisle in a litter of playing cards and spilled whisky.

Window glass shattered somewhere in the coach with a chiming tinkle from the strain put on its wooden frame. Through the opening poured a dense cloud of steam and smoke and roiling dust.

"Jumpin' Josie has blowed her boiler!" yelled the conductor, picking himself off the floor and lurching toward the rear door. "That's what happened—she blew her boiler tryin' to make the summit!"

Clint thrust his .45 in Sanchez' ribs, shouting to make himself heard above the banshee scream of escaping steam from Jumpin' Josie's ruptured boiler:

"Take it easy, Gila. Don't make any false moves."

But Gila Sanchez was too groggy to make any false moves. Dazed by the impact his face had taken against the iron rim of the seat ahead of them, he let the sheriff push him out into the tilted aisle. The drummer and his card-playing companions were scrambling out the front door of the coach to investigate.

Clint and his prisoner alighted from the rear platform and groped forward through the pall of steam and smoke to get a look at the wrecked engine. Jumpin' Josie lay crippled across the tracks, broken loose from her fuel tender. Cordwood was scattered around the right-of-way like toothpicks.

The conductor was braving the steam to help old Seth Kerwick out of the locomotive cab. The engineer's face was blood-smeared and his railroad jumper was shredded to ribbons by the force of the blast. The veteran hoghead was babbling dazedly, pointing behind him toward the wreckage of the cab.

"Jim's in there. Blowed to hashmeat. Don't let him fry to a crisp—"

Rex Clint kept his gun palmed. He could hear horses trumpeting in the derailed boxcar. Something was fishy here. It seemed unlikely that a bursting boiler could cause so much damage. Coals from the shattered firebox had started small fires in the creosote weeds lining the roadbed, the flames crackling unheard under the roar of escaping steam.

Instinct caused Rex Clint to spin around. He glimpsed one of the card-playing cowboys looming behind him, a clubbing gun butt driving in an arc toward his head.

Sanchez jerked his fettered arm and threw him off balance as the chopping backstrap thudded against Clint's temple. The old lawman sprawled in the cinders like a poleaxed animal, pulling Sanchez to his knees beside him.

The second cowhand groped up through the billowing steam and smoke clouds then, helping Sanchez drag the unconscious sheriff down past the coach to the open tracks.

The waddy who had pistol-whipped Clint fished a cold chisel and a heavy hammer from his brushpopper jumper, while his companion helped Gila Sanchez lay the single connecting link of the handcuffs across a steel rail.

A dozen hard blows and the chisel bit through the link. Sanchez yelled an exultant oath as he twisted the six-gun from Clint's fingers.

"I'm killin' the star-totin' son here and now!" vowed the outlaw. "I'm spillin' his John Law brains from hell to breakfast—"

A hand grabbed the breed's wrist and jerked him roughly across the tracks.

"Hold your temper, Gila. Maybe we'll have trouble gettin' the horses out of that boxcar. If the door's jammed you'll have plenty of work cut out for that gun, handlin' the train crew and our drummer friend."

The trio made their way up to the boxcar on the opposite side of the tracks from where the trainmen were groping for the dead fireman. Luck ran their way; the boxcar door opened easily on its iron runners. Inside were three saddle horses which the cowhands had put aboard the train back at Harquahala Junction, east of Warbonnet.

The horses, panicked by the jostling they had received when the car derailed, needed no urging to leap to the roadbed. In a moment Gila Sanchez and his rescuers were in saddle. They spurred off into a piñon-choked arroyo before any of the trainmen knew what had happened to Sheriff Rex Clint . . .

A BUCKET of water sloshed in his face brought the sheriff around. He sat up groggily, fingering the welt on his temple. He wasn't surprised to see that a broken link dangled from the steel bracelet locked to his wrist.

"We don't know how this happened,

sheriff!" the conductor of Number Six was telling him. "Your prisoner must have vamoosed on those horses that came aboard at Harquahala Junction this mornin'."

They helped Clint to his feet. His gun holster was empty. He forgot the throbbing pain in his skull as the galling realization swept through him that Gila Sanchez had outwitted him, made good his boast never to ride the train as far as Yuma.

Clint looked around, drawing his eyes into focus with difficulty. The fat drummer was leaning against the coach, looking scared and white. Over in the shade of an ocotillo clump, the engineer was squatting beside the corpse of his fireman.

"Sanchez outfoxed me," Clint admitted bitterly. "That engine didn't blow up by accident. I figger somebody dynamited the tracks so they could rescue my prisoner."

Seth Kerwick walked over to join them, his face a bruised and blistered caricature.

"The sheriff's right," agreed the veteran railroader. "Jumpin' Josie didn't blow her boiler. The explosion come from the firebox."

Clint's brows arched quizzically. "The firebox?" he echoed. "You certain about that?"

The engineer nodded. "Jim Wilcoxen—my fireman, God rest his soul—was stokin' the grate with wood to give me steam enough for this last pull across the summit," Kerwick recounted. "This blast come right in his face. Killed Jim dead as a tick in sheepdip. Lifted Jumpin' Josie clean off the rails and split her boiler wide open."

Rex Clint's head was clearing now. He digested Kerwick's version of the tragedy thoughtfully. Somehow, the explosion and Sanchez' getaway must be connected events.

He walked up toward the wrecked engine, reading the story of Sanchez' escape in the yawning door of the boxcar, in the freshly gouged prints of steel-shod hoofs where the horses had jumped to the ground.

His eye followed the hoofprints into an arroyo angling in from the south. Perhaps the trail would keep going toward the Sonora border, a hundred miles away on the heat-dancing horizon.

With Kerwick and the others dogging his heels, the Trigo County sheriff poked around the wreckage of Jumpin' Josie. Cordwood embers from her firebox, splintered to kindling size, were strewn through the cab and the surrounding right-of-way.

Clint inspected the matchwood bits carefully, as if he thought to find the key to the riddle of Jumpin' Josie's suicide in the broken fragments of wood.

He found what he wanted in the slivered butt of a stick of fuel which had been partially burned before the blast threw it clear of the grates. A two-inch hole had been drilled from the heart of the stick and plugged with a wooden stopper.

Clint pocketed the chunk without comment and turned to the conductor. "The nearest telegraph office is back at Summit View, ain't it?"

The conductor nodded. "I've already sent the brakeman down there to wire a report to the division superintendent at Eagletail," he said. "They'll send a wrecker outfit up to get us."

The sheriff scowled. "Can't wait," he said. "How far is Summit View?"

"Six-seven miles as the crow flies. Sixteen by the tracks."

Clint eyed his high-heeled cowboots regretfully. Those custom-built Coffeyvilles weren't intended for walking.

"I got to send a telegram myself," he said, consulting the turnip watch in his vest pocket. "Ought to get there by dark. I want to tell the warden at Yuma penitentiary that Sanchez' arrival has been unavoidably delayed."

The sheriff hitched his cartridge belt as a thought struck him. "Anybody got a gun I could borrow?" he said. "Can't tell, I might run across those three hardcases on the trip down."

The conductor climbed into the coach and returned with an old single-action Navy revolver with five chambers loaded and an empty under the firing pin.

"I doubt if you'll get a chance to use it, sheriff," said the conductor, as Clint jacked the gun open and inspected the mechanism. "Sanchez is probably well into Catclaw Desert by now, hightailin' for the Mex border."

IT WAS nearly sundown when Rex Clint hid in the roadside bushes to avoid meeting the Number Six brakeman, who was plodding back from Summit View. The sheriff didn't want anyone to see him just yet.

With the coming of dusk, he hastened

his steps, every stride costing him pain in the confining cowboots. The lights of the adobe shacks clustered around the watertank and fuel yard at Summit View station were beckoning him two miles down the ribbon of steel rails.

Footsore and panting, the sheriff reached the flag-stop shortly before moonrise. The station was closed, locked up for the night.

He did some reconnoitering. The odors of chili and frijoles wafting from the chimneys of the adobe *jacals* on the uphill side of the tracks identified the homes of the Mexican section gang.

Happyjack Keller probably occupied the frame shack over by the water tank, painted in the drab ochre and brown trim of the railroad company property. He approached the shack from the rear, his eyes spotting lamplight glowing through pinholes in the drawn windowshades.

The conductor's Navy six-gun was in Rex Clint's hand as he approached the back door of Happyjack's place. Inside he could hear men talking and laughing, the rattle of tin dishes.

From a leanto stable adjoining the frame house he heard horses feeding.

Clint paused, thumbing back the knurled gunhammer. His hand throbbed from the constriction of the steel bracelet girdling his wrist. He tested the doorknob with infinite caution, satisfying himself that the door was unlocked.

"A couple nights ridin' will put you across the border easy," Keller's voice reached his ears. "Even allowin' for a wide circle around Yuma."

Laughter greeted the station agent's remark.

Clint twisted the doorknob with his left hand and kicked the panels with a boot toe.

The door slammed open to reveal a tableau of men eating supper at Happyjack's kitchen table. Their postures were frozen in the glare of the ceiling lamp, framed in the doorway like a photograph.

Clint sized up the layout as he came through the door behind the jutting Colt. Gila Sanchez sat facing him, the two card-playing cowpunchers from Number Six seated at his right and left. Keller was over by the stove, a steaming coffee pot in his hand. Sanchez' hand was poised in the act of pouring sorghum on a stack of buckwheats, the lampshine glinting off the mate of Clint's handcuff.

"Reach—all of you!" snapped the sheriff, pausing spread-legged on the threshold. "You included, Keller!"

For a dozen clock ticks, the tableau held. Then Happyjack's nerve cracked, betrayed him into a rash attempt to beat Clint's cold drop. He dropped the coffee pot with a crash and clawed a six-gun from holster, almost before Rex Clint could swing his own weapon to meet the threat.

The .45's blazed in unison. Happyjack's hasty shot ripped a slot through the door lintel behind the sheriff. But Clint had squeezed off his shot with the precision of long experience under fire. His bullet ruined Keller's gun hand, sent the smoking Colt racketing across the stove.

Sanchez kicked back his chair and rose to his feet, splayed fingers hovering over the butt of Clint's six-gun thrust in the waistband of his foxed *gaucho* pants. But sure death loomed in the black bore of Clint's fuming Colt, the menace of it checking the border-hopper's draw.

Sanchez raised his arms hatbrim high. His two partners followed suit, their faces ash-gray. Less than five seconds had elapsed since Rex Clint had forced his showdown.

"That's better," the sheriff remarked. "Belly up to the wall yonder, while I collect your artillery."

AFTER he had piled a small arsenal on the kitchen table, Rex Clint poured himself a cup of coffee and sat down wearily to get the weight off his blistered feet. The java warmed his belly and brought on a rare conversational streak in the old lawman.

"You're surprised I trailed you here?" he asked dryly. "I didn't. You gents just underestimated my savvy of this desert country, is all. I knew no man a-hossback could cross the Catclaw in daytime without gantin' his horse or raisin' a dust that a man up on the skyline could foller for miles. You'd wait for dark, natural. And with Happyjack Keller backin' your play, it was logical you'd hole up here till the moon come up before you headed for Mexico."

Keller started to protest, but Clint cut him short, eyeing Sanchez' chap-clad accomplices.

"You two hardcases are most likely packin' rewards on your topknots," he said speculatively. "For the time bein' I'm holding you for aiding and abetting a criminal to escape justice. But you, Happyjack, I'm arrestin' for murder."

Keller, clutching his bullet-drilled wrist, twisted around from the wall to face the sheriff, raw terror in his eyes.

"Murder?" he repeated harshly. "I never killed a man in my life, Clint. You can't pin that on me."

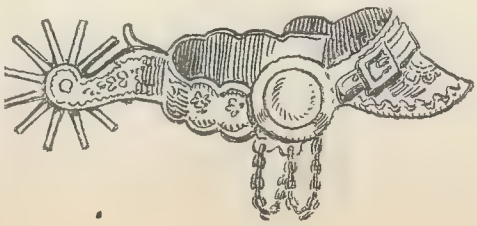
Rex Clint's head shake contradicted Keller's outburst. The sheriff reached in his pocket for the chunk of wood he had found at the scene of the train wreck. He tossed it on the table, and Happyjack Keller saw his death sentence there.

"The fireman on Jumpin' Josie was killed by that explosion of yours, Keller," Rex Clint said. "It's common gossip that you and Gila Sanchez were friendly. You aimed to get revenge on me and save Sanchez at the same time, so you drilled holes in a few sticks o' cordwood, filled the hollows with dynamite sticks, then stoppered the holes with wooden plugs like you see here.

"You loaded the dynamite chunks yourself, to make sure they'd be handy for the fireman to stuff in the firebox when the engine was climbin' the summit grade, instead of the Mexicans covering them up with other wood the fireman might not use before Number Six got to Yuma. Your partners got aboard at Harquahala Junction, to be ready to handle me when the engine blew up."

The sheriff set aside his coffee cup and wiped his mustache with the back of his hand.

"Now," he said, "we're taking a pasear over to your telegraph office, Keller. You can handle a key with your left hand? *Bueno*. I want you to notify the warden at Yuma that I've picked up some more customers for him and that we'll be comin' along directly."



Underground Bushwhacker

By Richard E. Albert

Chad Winslow burned to get even on the owner of Rocky Gap's gold mine. And especially on Dana Grant, a fellow digger. So Chad took a chance to kill two birds with one stone when a devilish fate shunted an underground cataract his way.

IT WAS dusk in Rocky Gap. The coming of night brought lights which created a gay illusion in sharp contrast to the drab reality of daytime. But down at the hundred-foot level it was always dark save for the pale glow from the flickering miners' lamps. It was dark and damp and dreary.

Chad Winslow hated this darkness. He hated it even worse than he hated the work, and the Reliance Mining Company, and a greedy owner who took your life's blood and gave nothing in return except a few measly dollars. There were many who liked Harvey Todd. They said he was fair and that the company gave them good wages and a decent place to live.

Of course it was all right if a person had no ambition and didn't want anything better. Most of the folks around Rocky Gap were pretty dull. They plodded along like slaves and looked forward to nothing better than a life of hard work and a little retirement fund when their usefulness was ended.

Chad Winslow looked forward to a lot more than that. Right now he looked forward to the gay night up above, because

it was almost time for the shift to end. He could forget this dark hole and the toil and the lousy gold ore which made another rich.

His pale eyes were aglow with anticipation, and his mouth twisted in a grin. Tonight was special. He had a date with Judy Holden. He would put forth his best manner, use all his charm, and perhaps he could talk some sense into her head.

Chad didn't see Judy much because there were too many nights when she was with Dana Grant. It was puzzling to Chad. The frustration of it infuriated him. He didn't know what she saw in Dana. He was handsome enough as appearances went, big and young, and always smiling as if he really liked these dull plodders who worked in the mine, but he had no ambition further than Rocky Gap. He was sort of a leader, president of the Reliance Miners' Association, and active in a lot of other things. That probably made an impression on Judy, although Chad couldn't see why.

Tonight, though, Dana was working the night shift. He would be far below at the one hundred and fifty foot level while Chad was showing Judy the town. They would see the really worth-while things. Dinner at a restaurant with bright lights, then a show afterward at the opera house. She would see that he, Chad Winslow, wasn't like the rest of these folks. He had ambition and would go places. He would do his best to convince her that she should go with him.

Judy Holden was an obsession with Chad. He wanted her as he wanted wealth and power. His desire for her was the only tie which bound him to this hole they called Rocky Gap.

A whistle sounded, and its hoarse voice echoed through the tunnel. It was the sound for which Chad had been listening. He threw down his pick where it would lie until he returned to take up the drudgery again in the morning. There was a babel of voices as men started toward the cage to be lifted to the surface of the earth above.

There was laughter and gaiety in their voices. Not so much of relief that another day of toil was over, but a manifestation of good fellowship and happiness with their existence. They hurried along, and Chad wondered why. The cage wouldn't leave until the last man was aboard, so why waste energy. He didn't hurry but let all of the others rush past him.

He brushed against the side of the tunnel and his clothes felt suddenly damp. He stopped and directed the lamp on his cap toward the wall. The dim rays sought out the rough structure of the rock. He saw water oozing out. It was coming through a crevice in the wall and trickled down the side. A small pool had already formed on the floor.

It looked as if the diggings had tapped a subterranean reservoir. Chad felt a sudden rush of terror at the thought. The water might easily have broken through while they were working and engulfed them all, might yet even before they reached the cage.

THE first terror fled. Straight thinking told Chad they were safe for the present. The flow hadn't broken through yet. It might hold for hours, or might even continue indefinitely as a trickle. Nevertheless, water in a mine was bad business. There were others down at the hundred and fifty foot level tonight. They would never discover the water until it was too late, because there would be nobody in the hundred foot tunnel again until tomorrow morning.

He started to call a warning. A sudden impulse checked his words. Dana Grant was down there tonight. If the water broke through, he and the others would work. The flow would go on undisturbed until it was too large to stop. After that there would be no more interference in Chad's attentions to Judy Holden.

Such an accident could break Harvey Todd and the Reliance Mining Company. That, in itself, was a singularly pleasing thought to Chad. With the mining company gone, Judy would no longer have a job in their offices. There would be nothing to hold her in Rocky Gap. Also it would serve Todd right. It would, of course, be hard on a lot of the other men and their families, but they were poor miserable souls who didn't have much feeling anyway—otherwise why would they spend a lifetime living and working in a place like this?

Chad hurried along after the others now. He got into the cage and the door closed. A bell clanged. The winches and cables started to creak; the car started its slow movement upward.

Chad stood in the corner and studied the faces of the men around him. They

didn't know. Nobody knew but him. It was a strangely potent feeling to realize he held the fate of so many souls in the palm of his hand. He could save them or let them go to their destruction. He held power in those two hands of his, more power than anybody else in Rocky Gap. More than even Harvey Todd. He wished he could tell it to the mine owner and still be able to go through with his plan.

But Dana Grant was down below tonight. Because he was there, the others had to be destroyed with him. Nobody must ever know Chad's secret. It would be an accident. Chad would feel sorry along with everybody else for the grief-stricken ones who were left behind. They would forget in time. Judy would forget. Chad would be tender and sympathize with her while she was forgetting.

The cage rose to the top. One by one the men filed out into the open air. Down the mountainside the lights of the town blinked their promise of gay times ahead. Tonight they gave a special promise to Chad. He hurried away from the tunnel entrance. The night was his, it might be the greatest night of his life. As he made his way toward the lights of Rocky Gap, his hopes were high.

He dressed and was meticulous in doing so. The coarse miners' garments were discarded for fine clothes. He washed his rough, calloused hands with care and cursed the mining company with all his might. But there was a bright side. If all went well, he might not have to go back in that dark hole again. The ruination of the mine was in sight. With it and Dana gone, Judy would surely want to leave Rocky Gap.

He called for her. When she appeared he was held breathless by her radiance and beauty. Her bright blue eyes were friendly. Chad had a momentary thought that they might also be friendly for Dana Grant. The thought tormented him.

The plan had to go through; the idea of its failure was intolerable. Judy was his girl tonight, Chad Winslow's girl. That was the way it had to be from now on. They walked along the board sidewalks, and he wondered what the folks were thinking. He wanted them to see him, wanted them to get used to seeing him with Judy Holden.

They went to the Oriental, the finest restaurant in Rocky Gap. Chad took the most conspicuous table in the place. When the Chinese waiter brought the menu, he ordered lavishly. Chad was going to show Judy what it meant to do things right.

They talked but their talk was general. Chad couldn't seem to get around to what he wanted to say. He wanted to find out some way how she felt about Dana. He wanted to hear her say that she didn't really care about him, but only admired him. There was never any opening or opportunity for Chad to get the conversation started right. He found it difficult to conceal the anger of his frustration. While he talked he listened for the whistle at the mine which would herald the disaster and remove Dana permanently from any further competition.

They were having their dessert when Judy told him.

"You've been awfully nice to me, Chad," she said, "so I wanted to tell you first. Dana and I are going to be married."

It was blunt and straight. Because he was unprepared for it, the soft words were like a knife thrust into his heart. He sat for a moment stunned. The malice in his pale eyes was hardly noticeable; there was a slight twist to his faint smile, but he didn't say the black things which were in his mind.

"I didn't know, Judy, you felt that way about him."

"I do, Chad," she replied. "Dana's fine and straight, but you know it as well as I."

Sure, Dana was fine and he was good, and he was a leader in the community. Those were the things a person could see. But she couldn't see that he was a drudge, and that he would spend the rest of his days in Rocky Gap. He might work up to a fairly decent job with the mining company, but he would still be cast for a lifetime with these dull and impossible people. Such things weren't for a girl like Judy. She needed gay times and fun, and a fellow with ambition like Chad Winslow.

MINE whistles started blowing then. Their sharp, shrieking blasts cut through the night. Chad's heart gave a joyful leap. He watched Judy turn pale and rigid when the full meaning of the disastrous sound settled upon her. She really did feel that way about Dana, then. It was too late now. Dana was trapped down there, helpless, and out of the way.

They rose from the table. Other patrons of the restaurant started surging for the door. The waiters left their charges, and the cooks came out of the kitchen. Outside, people were running along the street. In a town such as Rocky Gap, that whistle brought bad tidings. Most everybody was in some way or another connected with the mine.

"I'll have to go, Judy," Chad said. "They'll need me."

He would offer to help because it looked right, but it would actually do no good. By the time the water had been discovered, it would have practically flooded the lower level.

Judy went with him. They left the restaurant and started up the hill. There was a stream of people headed toward the mine. As they neared the entrance a crowd was gathering. There were tense, grim faces. Those whose menfolk were below knew the meaning of a mine disaster.

If Chad felt sorry for these people, his sorrow was overshadowed by his elation. His plan had worked. He was in the clear with Judy now. Nobody would ever know because it was a secret he alone held in his mind.

Harvey Todd, the mine owner, was hurrying along beside them. Chad saw the grim concern on his face. This thing meant a lot to him. It meant the loss of a tremendous investment. But it was Harvey Todd's worry, not Chad Winslow's.

The hoisting machinery was in operation, and long lines of hose were being lowered down the shaft. The pumps were churning, being held in readiness, and men were working feverishly.

Suddenly Judy gave a little cry and darted forward. Chad saw Dana then as he took the girl in his strong arms. They embraced for a fleeting moment.

It was a shock, like seeing a ghost, but Chad's bitter disappointment and his fierce anger were more than a match for his surprise. His elation of a moment ago was gone. It was almost more than he could bear. He wanted to fly at the man in an uncontrolled rage and tear him apart, but he knew he couldn't do that. It would be the worst possible thing, so he kept sullenly quiet.

The short, swift embrace had ended because Harvey Todd had arrived. Dana was talking to the mine owner.

"I came to the surface to get some powder," he said. "When I started back there was water running from the hundred foot level. We couldn't get the cage through."

"What's being done?" Harvey Todd asked sharply.

"We've started the pumps," Dana replied. "We're running the lines to the lower level. The only thing that can be done is to get into the hundred foot level and blast the ceiling down and shut off the water. We can get the cage low enough to reach the tunnel. After that we can pump the water from below. The men will be safe enough down there for a while. But we'll have to work fast."

"Good boy, Dana," Harvey Todd commended him.

Sure, Dana was a good boy, thought Chad bitterly. He was always showing off where it counted. That was why everybody thought he was so great.

"I'll go down," Dana went on, "but I'll need somebody with me."

Chad's mind was working fast. "I'll go," he volunteered quickly.

There was still a chance. With Dana and him down there alone anything could happen. Dana wouldn't be on guard because he didn't suspect anything. It would all look like an accident. Besides, Chad would be a hero then, because of his help in rescuing the others. It sounded even better than his original plan.

He went into the mine office and changed quickly into overalls, a rough shirt, and jacket. He put on cleated shoes to hold against the wet, slippery rock. When he came out Dana had all the equipment ready.

"Are you sure you want to go?" Dana asked before they entered the cage. "It's dangerous."

"I said I'd go," Chad clipped sharply.

Sure it was dangerous, but it was more dangerous for Dana. Chad was willing to accept his chances.

THE cage dropped and slowed as they approached the hundred foot level. Dana signaled instructions to the operator above. They inched toward the entrance of the tunnel. The water was rushing below them with a grim, roaring sound. Chad was suddenly afraid. They were so confined and helpless if anything went wrong. He wished he hadn't been

so hasty, but it was too late now to change his mind.

The car came down until its bottom almost touched the rushing current. Dana clanged the bell for them to stop it from above. The floor of the tunnel was about three feet below. They took heavy planks and pushed them out of the door and into the water. The rushing flow fought them. It was all they could do to get the planks lodged. Once they were in place, Dana and Chad nailed the ends to the floor of the cage with huge spikes.

The water rushed over the ends of the planks and presented an ominous and forbidding pathway. Dana lifted up the air drill and started making his way cautiously down the narrow gangway. The boards shook under the impact of the water. Chad followed and wondered if Dana was as scared as he.

Gradually they made their way down. The waters swirled around their legs. It was more than knee deep. The current was so swift that it was hard to stand up. So swift, thought Chad suddenly, that if a man lost his footing he would be carried over the brink and down the cage shaft. It was a brilliant thought, but the time for action was not yet at hand.

They attached to the air line which ran along the roof of the tunnel. The drills started biting into the rock walls. It was agonizing work and seemed endless but finally there were enough holes. Dana went back to the cage to get the explosives. He handed them down to Chad who in turn inserted them into the drilled holes. After that they put in the detonators and wires. The only thing left to do was to go to the surface and set off the charge.

Their business down here was almost finished. Chad knew the time for swift and decisive action was at hand. Dana was in front of him and turned toward the cage. He hadn't yet reached the runway, and he struggled through the rushing stream.

Chad made his lunge. His feet churned up the water. Dana heard it and turned sharply around. He saw Chad coming toward him with the expression of a maniac on his face.

"Chad!" he screamed. "What the hell!"

He threw his body toward the planks, grabbed them and held tight. Chad's hurtling form hit him but missed the full point of impact. He skidded off Dana's side and fell flat in the floor of the tunnel.

The swift water took him up and carried him along. He screamed and Dana grabbed at his foot and missed. Chad saw the water as it cascaded over the brink of the shaft entrance. The entrance was coming toward him.

Dana had seen him. Dana would know, but it didn't matter much now. He felt himself in the swirling eddy and then he was over space. He felt himself falling and heard Dana's shouts, but they became fainter and were drowned out by the roar of the water. The water was all around him, then gradually its roar became fainter. The sound ceased and then all feeling ceased.

Dana knew but Dana didn't tell, that is, nobody but Judy. The lower level had been pumped dry. The men were coming out of the tunnel entrance. It was a happy reunion.

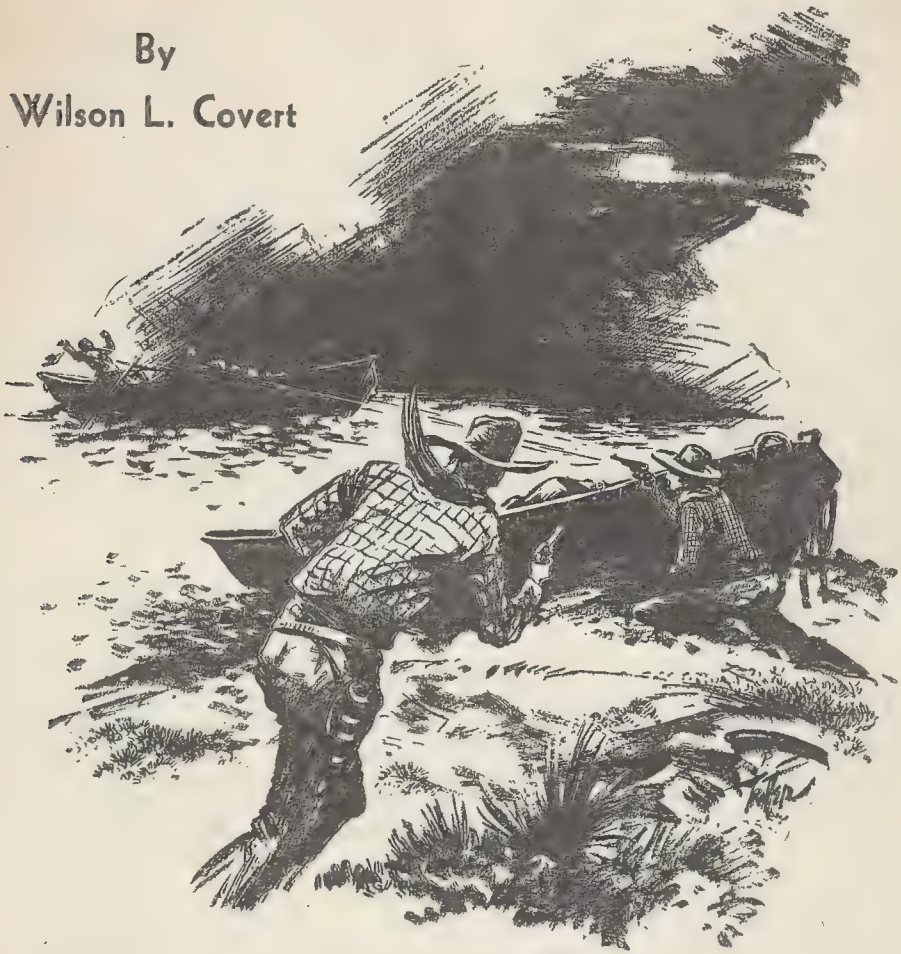
"I knew he had something on his mind, Dana," Judy said. "I could see it in his eyes."

"But he paid for it, Judy," Dana replied huskily. "And he helped to get the others out. He's a hero as far as they're concerned. . . ."

Colt Fiesta on the Rio

By

Wilson L. Covert



Those two mossyhorns knew things about Rio Grande banditry that the law needed to know. But because a rancher's confidence prevented a Ranger tip-off, only the old-timers alone could give a U.S. welcome to a buscadero landing party.

AN IRON-SHOD hoof grazed old Wash Danvers' leathery face. He rose up from the straw pile outside of Slatter's public corral with a yell that started the horse bucking. Its rider, between yanks to pull up the piebald's ducking head, threw venomous glances at old Wash. Another lank figure had rolled out of the straw, to kneel and blink at the pitching bronc. Old Dade Heely was Wash's saddlemate.

"If that there hunk of dynamite had stepped a half inch more to the right, Dade," said Wash, "I wouldn't have no face worth lookin' at."

Heely squinted sidewise at his pard.

"I've stood the sight of it for better'n thirty years, Wash, but if that map of prairie sod was messed up any worse I reckon I'd have to quit you."

"You wouldn't take no beauty prize yourself," snorted Danvers, then hollered at the piebald's rider:

"Sock in the spurs or you'll chaw dirt!"

Spurring and quirting, the man finally brought his mount to a stand not far from the corral. His hard eyes raked the lean pair watching him. Their whitening mustaches had a mournful droop, their hair needed cutting. Battered Stetsons, patched shirts, worn chaps and boots, with crossed gunbelts supporting a brace of .45's on each man's hips, bespoke cowhands down on their luck.

With Danvers and Heely it had become a chronic state. They were getting old for the business they had followed since the days of their vigorous youth. Cow bosses on that Texas range wouldn't hire them regularly any more, only at roundup time when there was a pressing need of extra riders. In the interim, they performed odd jobs, in town or on the range, to make ragged ends meet.

The man on the piebald, a stranger in Wickiup town, rapped, "You saddle tramps got no business snoozin' on the public highway. Served you right if you'd got tromped on."

Wash Danvers grinned. "I accept your apology, long as I ain't hurt. Just happens we hadn't no other place to spend the night."

The stranger muttered something. "Well, forget it. Where'll I find the agent who has the Slash S ranch for sale?" He pulled a folded newspaper from his hip pocket. "It's advertised here. I understand the place is located close by the Rio Grande."

"That's right," said Danvers. "Grover, the real estate agent, is two blocks down. The owner quit because rustlers was always drivin' his stuff across the river. Don't want to do Grover out of a commission, but he might forget to mention you're buyin' into a peck of trouble."

The stranger tapped the holster tied to his leg. "I've got the medicine for cow thieves if they bother me." His hard face split in a grin. "Anyway, it was friendly to warn me."

Danvers glanced at Heely, then back at the stranger, hopefully, licking his lips. "You wouldn't like to stand treat to eye-openers for me and my sidekick?"

The horseman's grin faded. "If you're thirsty, drink water."

Danvers and Heely pulled long faces. Wash said, "You ever tried drinkin' water, stranger, when you're a-thirstin' for likker?"

THE man didn't answer but trotted down the main street of the little cowtown, now beginning to show signs of life as the sun came up over the sawtoothed range in the east. While Danvers and Heely were lifting their riding gear from the straw where they had bedded down, a step sounded on the sidewalk.

"Here comes Slattery," said Danvers, with a quick look at the stocky figure approaching.

The corral boss greeted the pair with a slight smile. "Howdy, boys? When did you pull in? Must've been after I went home for the night."

"Yeah," said Wash, "so we turned our broncs inside and slept outside. You'll have to put it on the cuff for the hay they e't."

"Sure," nodded Slattery, good naturedly. "I know you'll pay when you can. Shame nobody'll give you steady work. You got more cow savvy than half the young buckaroos ridin' the range."

"They think we're stove-up old hasbeens," replied Danvers, "but we'd show 'em if we had the chance. C'mon, Dade, let's get saddled."

Mounting, they turned up the street at a shuffling walk. The sign of the Drovers' Restaurant met their eye, increasing their hunger pains.

"How long since we put on the feed bag, Dade?" asked Wash.

"A week, the way I feel," answered Heely. "Say, there's Miss Vina signalin' us!"

A trim-figured girl, with a white apron over checked gingham dress, had stepped out of the restaurant as the old rannies were passing in the middle of the street. She called, "Have you had breakfast, boys?" and smiled at the alacrity with which the pair shoved their horses curbward. It was a sympathetic smile. More than once had Vina Baldwin invited Danvers and Heely in for a free meal. She and her mother ran the only eating-house in Wickiup.

"I've a friend in here I want you to meet," said the girl, as the saddlemates dismounted. "He needs a guide, and you boys know the country."

They followed Vina inside. The only customer at the moment was a curly-haired young fellow in cowboy clothes, seated at a front table. As the old-timers drew up chairs, Vina introduced him as Trim Cleburne, who had closed a deal for the old Slash S ranch yesterday afternoon.

"Trim's been taking his meals here, that's how we got acquainted," Vina Baldwin said, dimpling. "I've told him of the former owner's experience with stock thieves, but he says he can look out for himself."

Cleburne looked up at the girl with a slow smile. "You won't have to worry on that score, Vina. The price suited me. I don't really need anyone to guide me—the agent offered to do that—but I do need a couple of hands to help drive the cattle when I buy 'em."

"We've got nothin' on the tally sheet," said old Wash, trying to control his eagerness. "If you're lookin' for a pair of steady saddlemen—"

"They're good hands, Trim," Vina said, smiling at the oldsters. "What'll you have, Wash and Dade? I'll get it while you're talking."

"Anything that'll fill us up, Miss Vina," grinned Heely. "We're hollow to the boots."

Cleburne looked the old rannies over carefully. "I had it in mind to hire younger men. But Miss Baldwin's recommendation goes a long way with me. I'll try you out."

Excited at the prospect of steady employment, Wash and Dade wolfed the ham and eggs, biscuits and coffee which Vina placed before them.

"I'm right pleased that other hombre didn't get the Slash S," remarked Wash, wiping ragged mustache. "He wouldn't 'a' hired us."

"Wouldn't even buy us a drink," said Dade, grimacing.

"What hombre do you mean?" asked Cleburne.

As Danvers described the stranger, Cleburne uttered a name. "Mayhew!" He pushed back from the table, a gleam in his eye, and drew his gun to check the loads. "Anyone with him?"

"Nope." Wash hastily drained his coffee cup and got up, Dade following suit. "You packin' a grudge against this Mayhew?"

Cleburne nodded grimly, started for the door. Vina ran after him, seized his arm, crying, "I hate gunplay! If you wait here, the man may leave Wickiup without ever knowing you were around."

"He'll learn about me from the agent," replied Cleburne, firmly disengaging her hand. "It'll be safer to go after him, Vina, before he starts stalkin' me."

As the girl fell back, Danvers and Heely pushed forward, working shooting-irons up and down in scabbards.

"The hands always side the boss," said Wash. "We'll traipse along to see he don't pull any tricky plays."

"I kill my own snakes!" Trim Cleburne spoke over his shoulder and went out, slamming the screen door.

But Danvers and Heely stepped out after him. Cleburne strode rapidly down the street toward the real estate office. Trailing him at a discreet distance, old Wash said to his saddlemate:

"The kid's no tenderfoot, but we can't risk lettin' our jobs go up in gunsmoke."

CLEBURNE, half a block ahead of them, evidently didn't notice the piebald bronc hitched in front of the blacksmith shop on the opposite side of the street. Heely saw the horse first and nudged Danvers, pointing.

"There's that spotted cayuse. His rider can't be far off."

Almost at the instant Heely spoke, the hard-visaged Mayhew slid around the open door of the smithy, gun in hand. Cleburne had passed on, his back was an inviting target. Mayhew's pistol flipped up.

Danvers and Heely jerked smoke-irons. Their shots blended as one. Chips flew from the door frame, showering Mayhew's hat. He spun about, firing as he turned. The bullet flew wide of the pair running toward the smithy.

The roar of Cleburne's Colt, as he swung round and discovered his enemy, sent Mayhew plunging for the hitchrack. Spraying lead at the oldsters, who were nearer to him than Trim, he spurred the piebald around the corner of the smithy. Danvers and Heely stopped running, tilted up their smoke-poles. Cleburne, looking crestfallen, reached the

front of the shop as the smith came out asking what the trouble was.

"That feller wanted to know if I'd seen you around," he told Trim. "Said his horse had a loose shoe, but it seems like he couldn't wait to have it fixed."

"Good thing we follered you, boss," old Wash remarked dryly.

Trim nodded. "But it's tough none of us got him."

Before the day was over, Cleburne had purchased a hundred head of stockers from a cowman who had occasionally hired Wash and Dade. The trio drifted the little herd down to the ranch on the turbid Rio Grande. House, barn and corral needed some repairing, a line shack near the river wanted a new thatch roof. For a week or more, Cleburne and the old cowhands were busy making repairs, not forgetting to keep an eye on the cattle.

One morning, Danvers and Heely started for the line shack. Reeds with which to thatch the roof grew plentifully along the river. Topping a rise that afforded a sweeping view of the sun-sparkling Rio Grande, they checked rein suddenly. Saddled horses were cropping the grass in the vicinity of the shack. A sombreroed man stood in the doorway, facing seven others, squatting outside in a half-circle.

"Rustlers, by the great horn spoon!" exclaimed Heely.

"Mebbe so," nodded Danvers. "Trim didn't say what Mayhew's business was, but there's that piebald again. Let's listen to their gab."

Reining back below the rise, they rode a quarter of a mile to come upon the line shack from the rear. Halting close to a side wall, Danvers and Heely caught a fragment of speech in Mayhew's harsh voice:

". . . Trim can't fight the gang and he won't dare go to the lawdogs. We'll tell him we're squattin', and he can like it or lump it."

Impulsively old Wash slid guns from leather. Old Dade, observing him, hissed, "Whatcha goin' to do, you locoed mossyhorn?"

Wash replied, "Tell 'em no squatters allowed. Save trouble for the boss later. Fill your hand and tail me."

They rode around the corner, fisting steel. The squatting men straightened with startled oaths. Mayhew, in the doorway, started his hand hipward, then froze under the sixguns pointing in his direction.

"The old rannies from Wickiup! What're you doin' down here?"

"Workin' for Trim Cleburne," crackled Danvers. "No room for squatters on the Slash S. Hop your saddles and clear out!"

At that instant, Heely's guns banged. One of the gang, partly sheltered by companions, had sneaked out a Colt. Firing as his legs buckled, the fellow sprawled down with one of old Dade's bullets in his hip. Mayhew stepped backward into the shack, began shooting around the door frame. Guns sprouted in the hands of his pals. A smoky volley cut through the clamor of Danvers' and Heely's Colts.

With their horses jumping under them, spoiling their aim, the old rannies slanted away to the east, swung round to head north. Faced back in saddles, they swapped shots with the smokewreathed gang until the lead began to drop short.

"Next time I follow you," growled Dade, "I'll make sure we're not waltzin' into a Colt carnival!"

"Still got your hair on, ain'tcha?" retorted Wash, watching the riders stretch out on their back-trail. "We'll dig in with Trim at the ranch and give 'em what-for."

MAYHEW'S gang trailed them hard. Danvers and Heely swept into the Slash S yard but a long gunshot ahead of their pursuers. A light wagon and team stood by the house. Trim and Vina Baldwin, who had been unloading sacks of flour and potatoes, hurried to meet the oldsters.

"Get into the house pronto!" hollered old Wash, sliding down. "Mayhew and some pals at our heels. Surprised to see you, Miss Vina."

With anxious eyes on the oncoming horsemen, the girl explained her presence, "Mother and I didn't think you'd stocked up much on provisions. As we can buy them wholesale, I brought a wagonload."

"Picked a bad time to come," said Wash. "Head for the—"

They were too late to reach the house, for Mayhew's gang came galloping across the yard. The leader, catching sight of the girl, tugged his bronc to its haunches and whipped off his hat. He

grinned as Cleburne, gun bared, stepped in front of Vina. Wash and Dade, pistols at the ready, stood on either side of Trim.

"Don't tell me you're married to the lovely lady, Trim?" said Mayhew.

"No, Chalk," Cleburne's tone was brittle. "Why were you chasin' my men?"

Chalk Mayhew flicked an eye at the old rannies. "A little misunderstandin'. They thought we were squatters, ordered us to clear out."

"I'm repeatin' the order, Chalk. This is my property and I—"

"Wait a mo', Trim. I wanted the ranch myself, but found you'd bought it. There's more range than you can use right now. If you'll let us occupy that line shack, graze a herd along the river, I'll pay handsome.

"You see, miss," he addressed Vina, "Trim and I were just like brothers till we had a fallin' out."

Vina said, "Trim, if he's willing to patch up your quarrel, you ought to meet him halfway. It'll help you get a start to let him share your grass, too."

Cleburne looked at her uneasily. "But I don't want him around, Vina."

Mayhew's eyes narrowed, though his lips still quirked up at the corners. "Best take your lady friend's advice, Trim. She has the better head for business."

Danvers and Heely thought there was a veiled threat in Mayhew's words. They were a little disgusted when Cleburne finally yielded. As the gang jogged away to take possession of the line shack, Vina patted Trim's shoulder.

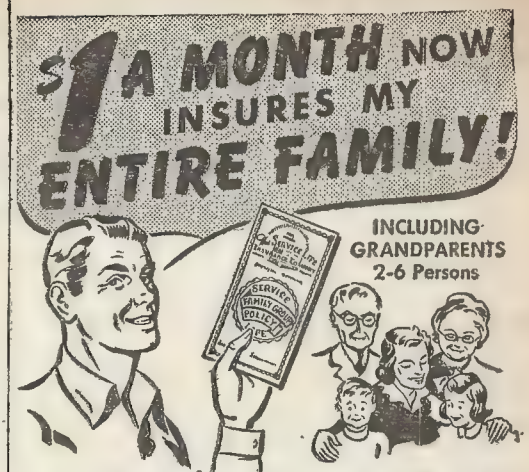
"I'm proud of you. It doesn't pay to hold a grudge."

Cleburne didn't say anything, but forced a smile as they turned to finish unloading the wagon. The old rannies walked their horses to the corral.

"Dade," said Wash, "that boss of ours is in a jackpot."

"Yeh," agreed Dade, "but he won't tell us nothin'. Seems as if him and Mayhew had been in crooked business together, and Trim broke away. Likely rustlin'."

"Us workin' for an ex-rustler!" muttered Wash. "Ain't that somethin'! Trim's scared Mayhew will tell Vina. Them young folks need help, Dade. You and me got to figure a way to do it. We can't put the sheriff or the Rangers on Mayhew's trail, 'cause he'd ring in



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Cleburne for past outlaw doin's if taken alive."

AFTER supper that night, the two oldsters left the house to go on herd duty. At least that was what they told Cleburne who was in a gloomy mood. They never went near the Slash S cattle, feeling sure that Mayhew wasn't interested in the little herd. Probably he was going to swim Mexican stock across the Rio Grande. Wash and Dade wanted to nip it in the bud before Trim was blamed. Six-shooter law was the only kind that would serve their purpose. Their night ride ended a short distance from the line shack.

"There's a light in the winder," said Wash, easing out of the saddle, "so the gang's at home. Ain't started runnin' wet cattle yet. Got to be careful not to let 'em hear us till we're ready."

Gathering armfuls of brush in nearby thickets, they cautiously approached the shack. The brush was stacked around the walls, the rumble of voices reaching them while they worked. Wash and Dade made another trip to the thickets before being satisfied they had enough.

The brush was fired at two points simultaneously, and the old rannies met at the front of the shack. Hunkered down in easy gunshot of the door, they waited as the flames ate into the dry brush, crept up the shack walls with a crackling hum.

Excited voices rose inside the shack. The door was jerked open, a man clutching a whisky bottle framed therein. Danvers and Heely saw two others behind him. Old Wash yelled:

"You can come out shootin', or toss your guns ahead of you and hit leather across the Rio Grande!"

With frenzied oaths, the men retreated, kicking the door shut.

Lowering his guns, Wash spoke to Dade, "They'll be comin' in a minute, findin' the shack too hot to hold 'em."

Hardly had he spoken than the door burst open again. The first man to leap forth fisted barking Colts. The old rannies, visible in the reflected glare of the burning shack, were aware of the bite of lead as they triggered at the bounding figure. The outlaw crashed to earth a few feet from the door. Crowding him came another powder-burning waddy, screaming his hate as he thumbed ham-

mers. He folded, voice and smoke-irons silenced.

A third man sprang over the crumpled form, hands lifted high as he ran. Wash and Dade tipped up smoking guns while the outlaw sprinted toward the river. They heard a splash as he dived in.

"Where's the rest of 'em?" Wash muttered, watching the smoke-filled doorway.

No more outlaws erupting, they advanced to the shack, peered in as well as they could without getting singed. There was no other exit, yet the room, now luridly lit by the flames, was empty.

Disappointed, Wash turned to Dade. "Only three of 'em around, that's the answer. And we didn't get Mayhew. Others must be over the river on a raid. Ain't that our luck!"

They were dragging the slain outlaws away from the fire-wreathed shack when a voice spoke from the rimming darkness:

"H'ist 'em, you fellows!"

Danvers and Heely whirled, throwing hands to holsters. Two tall strangers in cowboy garb emerged into the lighted area.

"We're Rangers," said the one who had spoken before. "The fire and the shootin' attracted us. Get your hands up and spill us the meanin' of this shindy. Owlhooters at odds, eh?"

While he and Dade reached for the sky, Wash was thinking fast. It wouldn't do to tell the truth since Chalk Mayhew had escaped their trap and was certain to involve Cleburne if caught by lawmen.

"Nope," said Danvers, "we're hands at the ranch above here. The fellers holed up in this shack were squatters. Warned 'em once to go and they wouldn't. Tonight we gave 'em the choice of leavin' or eatin' lead. A cowman's got the right to chase squatters off his range."

"Yes," the Texas Ranger admitted slowly, "but it's usually best to let the sheriff do the oustin'. Our business is with cattle thieves, smugglers and the like. You come with us to camp and see the sergeant. Where's your horses?"

THE Ranger camp was several miles down the river. The keen-eyed sergeant in charge questioned the old rannies closely. They stuck to it that the

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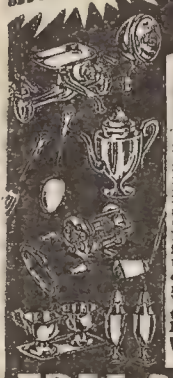

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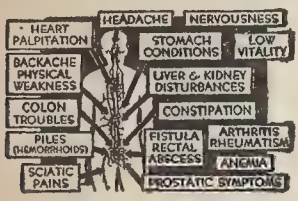

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men they had been fighting were just hard-bitten squatters.

"If any more of these squatters bother you," said the Ranger sergeant, "report 'em to me or the sheriff. They may be criminals, and it's criminals we're hunt-in'. There was plenty of rustlin' at that ranch when Hopkins owned it. All right, let 'em go, boys."

Released, the old rannies struck out for the Slash S. Half the night had passed by the time they reached the Ranger camp. It was daylight when Wash and Dade came in sight of the home ranch. They knew at once that something was wrong. On the porch six saddles lay in a row. There was a piebald bronc among the horses in the corral. While the oldsters sat staring, sixty yards from the house, a face they had come to hate popped into a front window.

"So you thought you'd burn me out and I'd quit, you meddlesome mossy-horns?" greeted Chalk Mayhew. "Sorry I was across the river and missed you."

"No sorrier than we was, Mayhew," retorted Danvers. "And you'll light a shuck, if you're wise, while the trail's open. 'Cause why? The Texas Rangers dropped in after we cleaned up."

"The Rangers!" exclaimed Mayhew, startled. Then he calmed. "I've nothin' to fear from them. What'd you tell 'em?"

"Didn't know much to tell," replied Wash, "but if you got any reason to keep out of their hands, best start runnin'."

At that moment another face, Trim Cleburne's, showed at the window. He looked even more glum than he had the night before. "Afraid you've made a mess of things, boys. Chalk and his men have moved in here since you burned the line shack. They've taken my gun."

Mayhew spoke in a low tone to Cleburne, who vanished from the window, to reappear at the door. He walked toward Wash and Dade, his holster empty. Mayhew leaned in the window with bared pistol, watching alertly. As he reached the old-timers, Cleburne said in a guarded voice:

"He expects me to help capture you two. Wants to find out what you really told the Rangers. I know you boys meant it for the best when you jumped the gang. If you'd got them all—well, nothin' could have suited me better. But the way it is, I'm worse off than ever."

"Maybe not, Trim," said Danvers. "We

savvy what's wrong. You once rode with Chalk on cattle raids or somethin'."

"Cattle raids," Trim nodded. "Didn't know he was an owlhooter at first. I quit, got a job on the stage line, made some honest money. Always wanted to be a cowman. Hadn't seen Chalk for a long time when we met in Wickiup. If I'd killed him then—I'd promised to shoot him on sight—I wouldn't be in this jackpot. And the worst of it is, I'm supposed to marry Vina Baldwin tonight."

"What!" chorused Danvers and Heely, but not too loudly, for Mayhew was watching with his ears stretched. Two more of the gang had joined him at the ranchhouse window.

"Popped the question yesterday, after the gang had gone," said Trim. "She thought it was kind of sudden, but said, 'I'll marry you any time you say, Trim.' I got to thinkin' afterward I hadn't the right to ask her. Even though I've been goin' straight, with Mayhew hangin' around like a buzzard, sooner or later she'd find out what I once was. It made me feel a heap gloomy."

"Hurry up, Trim!" Mayhew bellowed impatiently.

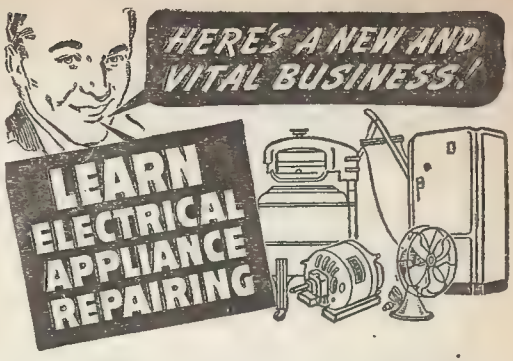
"You two drag it for Wickiup," Cleburne said hurriedly, "and tell Vina that if I don't show up for the weddin', I—well, I'll be dead. It will be either me or Chalk before the day's over. He has some owlhoot job on hand for tonight; wet cattle, I suspect—"

"Trim," interrupted Wash, "there's no sense your gettin' killed, which you will be if you stay here. Swing on behind me and we'll run for it."

"And make it snappy!" added Heely. "That gang's plumb restless."

Cleburne moved fast. As he sprang up behind old Wash, guns roared from the ranchhouse. The two rannies, smoking answer, kicked their mounts into a lope. The hoofbeats rose to a swift staccato, interspersed with gunpowder blasts. Mayhew and his men had deserted the window. The whole gang was spilling from the house as the horses pounded away up the range.

"Before they get saddled," said old Wash, looking back at the figures streaming toward the corral, carrying saddles, "we'll be out of sight. Then we'll try our hand at trail-blindin'."



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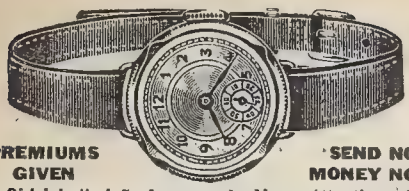

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SO EFFECTIVELY did they blind their trail in the roughs above Slash S that, half an hour later, Danvers and Heely felt it safe to pull up, several miles from town.

"Now that we've foxed 'em," said Wash, "you take my horse, Trim, and go on to Wickiup. Keep away from the ranch till you hear from us, 'cause I figure them Rangers are suspicious of the whole setup. Tonight, if Mayhew brings any wet cattle across, Dade and me will be at the river. This time we'll really clean up.

"Don't be mulish," he added, seeing the stubborn look on Cleburne's face. "You and Vina befriended us. We want to make it possible for you both to have all the happiness that's comin' to you."

But Trim shook his head. "You're salt of the earth, you two. But I can't let you fight my battles. All three of us will be at the river tonight. I hope Chalk don't get cold feet account of the Rangers, and change his plans."

Nightfall found them heading down to the Rio Grande, below the ruins of the line shack. They quit saddles, moving cautiously, certain that Mayhew had posted a lookout if he was going to operate that night. Old Wash suddenly hissed a warning, whipped out the gun on his right hip; he'd given the other Colt to Trim. A rustling in the reeds along the embankment had caught the oldster's ear. It might be the wind, but— He saw the dim outline of a man's head, turned in their direction. A pistol blared, the bullet chopping through the tall grass in front of them as all three flattened. Danvers' Colt smoked. The lookout stumbled out of the reeds and fell on his face.

"If they heard them shots in Mexico," Wash muttered, "it may keep 'em from attemptin' to cross. But we'll have to take that chance."

Cleburne illuminated the features of the dead lookout by striking a match under cover of his hat. It wasn't Mayhew. The trio squatted in the reeds, to peer at the dark shore opposite and listen for the lowing of cattle.

An hour passed. It began to look as if the gunplay on the Texas side had warned the gang off. When, finally, they detected something besides the soft lapping of the river, it wasn't what they had expected. The low splashing of oars.

Two rowboats emerged from the blackness of the farther shore, came on steadily.

Danvers, Heely, and Cleburne tensed. It must be Mayhew's gang, but what were they bringing in boats? The lead boat grated on the Texas bank and a man jumped out, calling the lookout's name. Old Wash spoke:

"He's racked his chips and you're joinin' him in a watch-tick, Chalk!"

Mayhew jerked about, facing the reeds from which the voice emanated. He shot from the hip as he turned. The red spurt of Wash's .45 lashed back at him and Mayhew reeled. There were two bullets in Chalk when he fell, Trim's shot roaring on the heels of the oldster's. The other occupants of the boat were leaping out with guns aflame. One landed on the bank, banging away at the flame-lighted coarse grass until the weight of lead in his tough body pulled him down. The second outlaw had pitched loosely over the side of the boat into the water.

"That other boat's backin' off!" yelled Wash, plunging toward the one that was beached and stooping low. He fired across the bow, hit one of the two men in the second boat, who ceased rowing and crumpled. His companion opened fire.

Heely and Cleburne, scrambling to Danvers' side, joined him in the shelling the last of the gang. The outlaw was shooting from behind some bales piled between stem and stern. For a minute or two he traded lead with the trio crouched by the first boat. Then he stuck his head out too far. Whistling slugs nearly tore it from his shoulders. He collapsed in the bottom of the rowboat.

WHILE it floated with the current, horsemen pushed down the embankment. A sharp command fell familiarly on the ears of Wash and Dade.

"It's the Ranger sergeant!" exclaimed Danvers, wheeling with his gun pointing down. "Howdy, sarge! You're a little late if you aimed to catch these badhats alive."

There were five of the Rangers. Quickly dismounting, one of them lighted a pine torch. The old rannies wore guileless grins as they blinked in the sudden glare. Cleburne was tight-lipped. He nodded when the sergeant asked if he was the new owner of Slash S.

"We were up at your ranch," the tall

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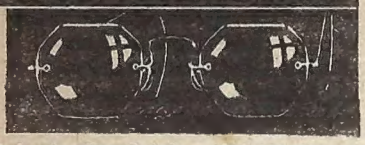

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Ranger said significantly, "but findin' nobody home, started down here." He broke off to address the man with the torch, who had stepped to the beached boat and was slashing at the balsa amidships with a knife. "What's in 'em?"

"Dope!" replied the other Ranger.

"There's another boatload out in the river," said old Wash.

"Same gang you told me were squatters?" the sergeant asked. "How'd you find out they were smugglers? I told you to report to me—"

"Sure you did, sarge," grinned Wash. "And what you said gimme an idea they might be criminals, after all. I seen you was suspicious of the Slash S outfit, too. So I says to the boss we'd best watch for them squatters to come back. When we seen boats bein' rowed to the Texas shore after dark, we knowed somethin' was up.

"You couldn't expect us to leave then and hunt you fellers up. We was primed for 'em when they started to land. If you don't believe it, look round and count the—"

"I believe you," the tall Ranger laughed and held out his hand to Cleburne. "I'll admit I thought you might have started up this ranch again as a blind for runnin' wet cattle and smugglin'. Glad to know you're an honest cowman that we won't have to watch."

"Thanks, sergeant." Trim, gripping his hand, looked gratefully at Danvers and Heely. "I've a couple of smart cowhands workin' for me, in spite of their years."

Old Wash turned to old Dade. "Don't stand there grinnin', gran'pa. Go fetch the broncs, if you're able to drag your old bones that far. The boss will be late for his weddin' if we don't straddle leather pronto."

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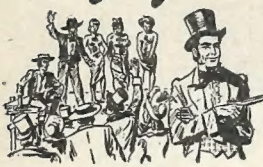

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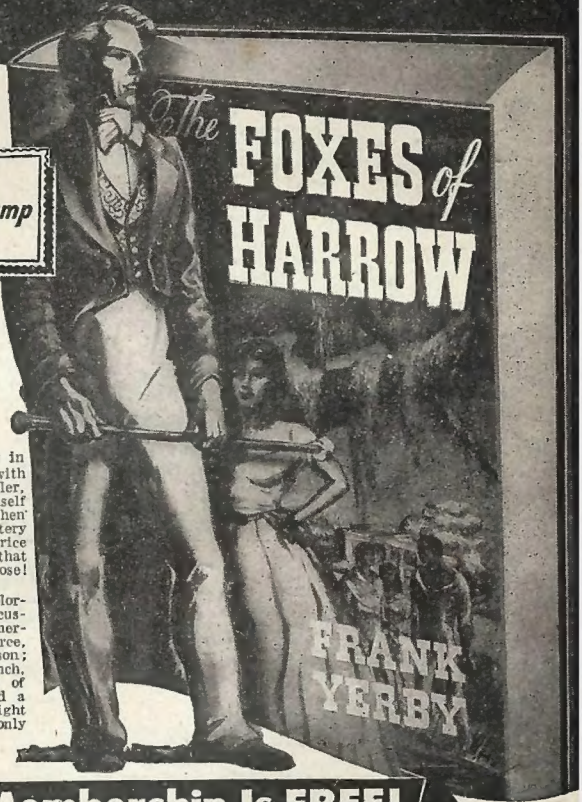

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Are you ALL MAN—tough-muscled, on your toes every minute, with all the up-and-at-'em that can lick your weight in wildcats? *Or do you need the help I can give you*—the help that has already worked such wonders for other fellows, everywhere.

All the world knows I was ONCE a skinny, scrawny 97-pound weakling. And NOW it knows that I am the holder of the title, "The World's Most Perfectly Developed Man." How did I do it? How do I work miracles with the bodies of other men in only 15 minutes a day? The answer is *"Dynamic Tension,"* the amazing method I discovered and which changed me from a 97-pound weakling into the champion you see here!

In just 15 minutes a day, right in the privacy of your own home. I'm ready to prove that *"Dynamic Tension"* can lay a new outfit of solid muscle over every inch of your body. Let me put new, smashing power into your arms and shoulders—give you an armor-shield of stomach muscle—strengthen your legs into real columns of surging stamina. If lack of exercise or wrong living has weakened you *inside*, I'll get after that condition, too, and show you how it feels to LIVE!

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In every part of the country Charles Atlas is recognized as "America's Greatest Builder of Men." Thousands upon thousands have put their physical development into his capable hands!

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I want the proof that your system of **"Dynamic Tension"** will help make a New Man of me—give me a healthy, husky body and big muscular development. Send me your free book, **"Everlasting Health and Strength."**

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